Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

By: Starlight's Poet

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Prologue

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Since time immemorial...they were known as,

"Tricksters."

Persona 5: Hoshi To Bokura To

Prologue: Gambling for Escapade

(cue: Life Will Change)

A helicopter rushed above the crystalline ocean, running toward the brilliantly-lit city not far away from it's destination. It hovered above the towering sky scrapers, moving straight toward it's apparent

target destination; a large casino with a woman dressed like a cow worker, holding up a pair of scales with the word "WIN" highlighted down from the scales in neon light, like the cowgirl. Everyone was moving through the street, the ground below being congested with a constant flow of activity. However, some people had stopped, either in front of the casino, or in front of several TV's scattered throughout the streets, be them through a window or built-up on a building. Some even stopped to look at their phones.

The reason for this? One must look no further than inside the casino. Alarms were blaring loudly, men dressed in black suits and tinted glasses ran all around the places, heads snapping around wildly as they looked at their surroundings. The people inside the casino were quickly growing confused and terrified, unaware of what was happening. Some had found black shadows leaping across the balconies and chandeliers. "Wh-what's going on?" a woman asked, anxious and worried. The casino was quickly growing more and more confused, even as three men in suits began to enter the room, their eyes trained above them. No one knew what was happening. Had someone been killed? Was it a terrorist's attack? Was there a robbery taking place? The more confused they grew, the more terrified they became. It was within human nature to seek information in order to develop a rational decision and then act upon that decision as calmly as possible. Without information, humans are left in the dark, left to the unconscious dark thoughts in the back of their minds, thinking of the worst case scenarios. Some people began to flee, not willing to see just what was causing this commotion. A few others, however, looked excited, looking around for the cause. They had a feeling they knew who was responsible, and they wanted to see who it was.

Then, someone found the cause. "L-Look, up there!" Their attention turned to one of the chandeliers above them. Security immediately fled into action, making their way towards the target while also keeping in mind of the danger they proposed. The crowd became more wild, with the rare few mentioned before taking out their phones, and snapping pictures. Standing atop the chandelier was a singular individual, dressed like a magician. He had short, messy black hair and gray eyes, the upper half of his face hidden behind a white mask, shaped somewhat like a bird, with a black design. He

wore a black trench coat, a gray-collared shirt with black trousers, boots pressed against the foothold beneath him, and red gloves at his hands. Under one arm, he carried a silver briefcase, and plastered across his face was a giant smirk.

"Target has been found," one of the guards remarked as they moved. "Moving in to capture."

Seeing the security guards moving, the masked individual's confidence grew as he turned away, leaping off the chandelier and into the darker recesses of the casino. As he moved, he left behind the briefcase for his allies to take, and continued to move. He continued to dash around, leaping across all the obstacles in his way like a phantom, which he indeed was, before he found himself atop a glass catwalk. Below, the startled masses were in a stir.

"Good," a boyish voice said, resonating in his head. *"Now get running!"*

"This is our only chance!" a boy's voice followed.

"Stay calm," a girl's voice said with enthusiasm. *"You can get away now!"*

"We'll retrieve the briefcase on our end," another girl's voice called out. However, static and garbled words also came across, causing confusion. *"Hm? What was that?"*

"Don't concentrate on us," the boyish voice continued. *"Just concentrate on getting away!"* The masked thief nodded, and began to move, jumping across the catwalks and chandeliers. As he did, the boyish voice began to praise him. *"But I have to say...showing yourself to the crowd in such a bold manner was an excellent move!"*

A third female voice, this one with a more light-hearted feel, giggled. *"I bet Skull couldn't have done that easily."*

"This is because he has a lack for the aesthetics," a refined male voice said with an exasperated sigh.

Another male voice, this one more casual and boisterous, growled. *"Nobody asked you, Inari!"*

The masked thief rolled his eyes, shaking his head with a grin before he stopped, about to head up towards one of the exit routes before he stopped, finding several guards where he was supposed to be. He immediately changed directions, and moved away, jumping across another catwalk before he reached an archway. Swiftly, he made his way across before jumping up on the railing, getting up to the second floor. He broke out into a run, but was stopped when two guards blocked his path. A rumble shivered through their bodies before they broke, bodies convulsing as their forms turned dark, skin becoming pitch black, and steel masks covering their faces, bearing only bright yellow eyes, cold and dark with a sense of stone cold melancholy. He heard the sound of foots slamming into the ground, and turned to find another such masked individual in front of him.

"Enemy readings determined," the cheery female voice called. *"Beat 'em up, Joker!"*

The masked thief, now known as Joker, smirked. 'Time to roll up my sleeves,' he thought before he jumped up. He landed square on the shoulders of the masked man behind him, and then grabbed it by the chin of the mask, then proceeding to rip it off with fearsome force. The guard was knocked back after Joker leaped away from him, revealing a blank, black face with red eyes. Then, the body began to darken, red veins flushing out over the black skin. Suddenly, the guard's hulking frames began to spasm wildly. Then, the bodiy exploded. Emerging from the black and red mess was an inhuman creature. It looked like a bipedal beast with the head of a bull, bearing a demented form of a noble with a large tail and a cravat at the neck. The creature let out a snarl, and slammed its feet into the ground. Joker, sensing danger from below, performed a backflip, evading a pillar of fire from engulfing him. He landed back on his feet before he whipped out his knife, smirking devilishly.

"Ravage them."

Suddenly, his mask became engulfed in blue flames as he placed a hand over his face. The flames grew above him, forming into a figure from behind. The flames solidified, forming into a solid shape,

easily twice the size of Joker. Wearing a red coat, the length of the clothing only made it up to the mid-back of the thing. A black mask with red designs made it seem like it had horns. Two gigantic black wings spread themselves out in a flourish and showy motion. Massive red boots with bladed heels were worn at the bottom to create a rather dignified yet dangerous look. Then, there was a white scarf and a tall top hat as two articles of clothing a gentleman would wear along with a massive vest with red strings. Black-clawed fingers sprouted out from red fingerless gloves, ready to slice all those that stood in its path. Chains rattled and surrounded its body, as if the metal links were being bent to the will of the massive entity. Flames burned on the black mask, resembling sharp teeth curled into a wicked grin, and eyes narrowed into a taunting glare.

Immediately, Joker acted. Swiftly, he pulled out a black gun from his sleeve, and proceeded to unload his bullets into it. One, two, three, four, five, six. Seven shots blasted into the monstrous creature, leaving holes with fluid leaking out of them. The bull-like being snarled in rage, snapping its head up and glaring at him with red eyes. ***"You're gonna pay for that!"*** it bellowed before it slammed its feet into the ground. Unlike before, Joker couldn't evade it. The winged being behind him, however, shielded him from the flames, its wings wrapping around him to form a shield. The pillar of the inferno engulfed its being. Pain erupted through Joker's body as the intense heat seared into the being, almost as if they were connected on some level. The flames faded shortly after. The being vanished, and the white avian mask reformed on his face. Joker scowled, and promptly charged at the bull-like being. It snorted, and swung its tail at him. He dodged it with ease, and retaliated. He swung his knife, three times in succession, creating additional cuts that cut into its chest before he deftly rolled back, avoiding a stomp of anger, and took aim once more. He fired off his gun once again, though this time, he had a clear target.

He pulled the trigger, and the bullet pierced straight through its head. The creature gave a dying, weak yelp before it fell back, and became black and red goo, splattering to the ground with a sickening squelch.

Joker huffed, dusting off his coat, which was partially singed before

he slipped his gun and knife back into his sleeves. With security fast approaching, he couldn't afford to stay here for long. He took a quick look around, and immediately found his escape route. Just in time, too. Behind him, he heard the approaching footsteps of more enemies, though these were without masks, only bearing faceless faces and red eyes. The closest one jumped up into the air, shock baton raised. He smirked, and leaped away to avoid it. He pushed himself off his hand before he landed on the railing, and took another leap, this time onto a chandelier. Using it as a platform, he jumped up to the next level of the casino, with an open door ahead, as if greeting him.

He wasted no time. Swiftly, he moved into the door, and into the massive complex that also laid within the casino, patrolled only by security. As he moved, he heard the voices of his comrades chatter.

"Alright, Joker is on the move! Security's in a dizzy, trying to locate him! Everyone, get moving!"

"W-wait, is he going to be okay in there? Can he even here us?!"

"I'm reading everyone, and there's no interference, so yeah!"

He gave a small quip, letting them know he was aware. He pushed through a pair of double doors, and stepped into another corridor. He moved left, only to stop and retreat back into the space close to the door, seeing several guards moving about. The only thing keeping them separated, and what would have allowed them to find him, was the fence in between their locations. "We can't find the intruders," the guard reporters. To Joker's curiosity, this one didn't have black skin or a featureless face. Rather, this one had actual features, such as a nose, mouth, and a set of narrowed eyes. "Understood, we'll keep looking."

'A cognition, maybe?' Joker wondered, but shrugged. As soon as the security guards turned their attention elsewhere, he moved away from his hiding spot, and ran to the right, where another set of doors waited for him. In his sprint, he caught sight of another guard, also barred from him by a fence, though he was in clear sight of the thief. "You're quick!" the guard commented in shock as he barrelled through the doors, and then reported in. He wasn't about to waste

time wondering about what, and instead got moving quickly as possible. He came into another corridor, this one bending to the right. He was about to round into a corner, but stopped, noticing the presence of a man standing at what was the only way up. He cursed, and quickly took refuge behind a crate.

Joker couldn't afford to waste time. He had to act quickly, lest he be caught. With that in mind, he took out a small pellet from his pocket, a gift from a confidant of his, and quickly moved into position. If one might have seen him move, it would be a fluid motion of black and red as he moved from crate to crate, eventually coming right next to the man, just hidden by the faint, dark shadows of the corner. He looked back at where he came in, and tossed the pellet. It smacked against the wall, creating an audible, loud banging sound. It was a firecracker going off, but the sound was made to distinctly resemble gunfire. It worked, as the guard's attention quickly shifted to where the firecracker was set off, and moved away. With the guard gone, Joker then moved into the staircase. His feet pounded against the pavement, shooting up the stairs before he reached the next level of the casino. When he entered a new corridor, he saw a window leading into another room, this one with several people inside, all at computers. Carefully, he made his way without being seen.

"He's not alone!" he heard someone in the room shout into a communicator, no doubt the leader of what was going on. "Find them, and kill them all!"

Joker gave a low 'tch' of annoyance. He was risking himself for his friends, so he wasn't about to let them die. Without making a sound, he continued his way. He found another flight of stairs, and again made his way up. *"Joker, you there?"* the cheery girl's voice called. *"You're close to the exit!"* He gave a nod of acknowledgement. After two flights, he found no more staircases leading up, and only a corridor leading out to a single door. He dashed through the hallway, and rather than take a moment to open it, used his shoulder to plow through the door, forcing it open. The lock broke from the force and it let him spill on through, only to come to a stop at a railing. He grunted a bit, feeling the railing smack into his gut before he looked up, and to his confusion, found himself staring back at the casino's bottom floor, with the area he was in previously not far below.

"What's the matter? The exit should be up in front."

The masked thief looked up, and found a stained glass window, easily the size of a clock on a tower, not too far from him. The distance was fairly short, so it wouldn't be hard to reach it, if he used the railing to run across. "Through there?" he asked, wondering if this was the only exit available to him.

"That's just how it is," the voice sighed. *"After the commotion, the bottom floor's-"*

"-completely closed off!" another female voice, the one who made the remark about skull, said in concern. *"H-hey, can you make it?!"*

Joker grinned. This was actually exciting to him. It would be like a grand exit. Nice and flashy, sure to catch enough attention. "Don't move!" he heard someone shout from behind. He looked over his shoulder, and found three guards slowly walking toward him, guns aimed. "There's nowhere to run!" Nowhere to run? Who were they kidding? There was always a place to run. With a defiant smirk plastered across his face, he hopped atop the railing, and took off in a run, heading straight for the stained glass window. The guards immediately went to follow, pouring out into the balcony overlooking the casino and then began shooting at him. Screams of shock and horror came from below as he avoided them, some nearly grazing him. Once he was close enough, he hopped over to the railing facing the window. He landed in a crouch, easily maintaining his balance before he looked at the guards. Two were circling around him from opposite sides while the third remained at the door, reloading his gun.

He gave them a cheeky grin, and waved. "See ya~"

Then, without hesitation, he leaped forward, crossing his arms over his face and threw himself through the window. It broke easily, the shards dancing around him was propelled forward, emerging out into the moonlight. *"Hmph,"* the cheery voice snorted. *"What a showoff!"*

"So reckless..." the other female voice sighed, though it was obvious she was impressed.

Joker landed straight on his feet, though to prevent any serious injury, as soon as his feet touched the ground, he tilted his body forward to come into a roll, thus placing himself into a crouch. He winced slightly from how harsh hitting the ground was. His back, feet, and shoulders ached a bit as a result of the action, though he no doubt left an impression. He dusted off his jacket, and tugged at his gloves after he stood back up. All that was left now was to-

Suddenly, light filled into his vision. One, two, three giant spotlights shined on him, lighting up the area. He gave a slight gasp of shock, forced to raise his arm to block the light. His eyes quickly adjusted, and lowered the arm, only to bite back a scowl. ′

Shit.'

"These readings...it can't be!"

"Joker, what's wrong?!"

"H-hey, is he gonna be alright?!"

"Joker, can you make it out of there okay?!"

"What's happening down there?!"

"Joker?!"

"Joker!"

He heard the panicked cries of his crew echoing in the back of his head, the connection still present. Immediately, he cut it off. He didn't want to worry them any further. To be honest, he had to worry a bit about himself here, as he was staring back at what could only be considered a gigantic sea of police officers, armed with rifles, stun batons, riot shields, and padded armor plating. There must have been, at least, a thousand, maybe more. Well, they certainly now how to flatter a guy. All of this, for them? Just to capture the Phantom Thieves? All in all, quite impressive...though now he was wondering how in the hell he was going to get out of this mess. Sadly, Joker didn't have much time to think, as the apparent commander of the large troop yelled through a loud speaker.

"ARREST HIM!"

The shout barely echoed, but it was enough to spur the guards into action. They moved, or rather stomped toward him like a wave of angry mobs herding together. Cursing, he quickly moved, heading straight for the fire escape. The spotlights continued to hunt after him, keeping him in sight. He quickly reached the ladder leading up, and hopped right on, away from the grasp of the officers. One had swung his shock baton just right underneath his feet. He smirked tauntingly, glancing back at them as he made his way up.

Unfortunately, he realized too late he should have looked at the fire escape more closely. As soon as he reached the catwalk that would have led up to his escape route, he found several officers crowding it, all with their guns aimed. His eyes widened, now realizing his blunder as one guard raised his rifle, and slammed the butt into his face, knocking him off the ladder and right into the sea of guards. He hit the ground, and was immediately swarmed, several of them, all at once, restraining him. One bound his legs, another with his arms, and others keeping their gun trained on him, not allowing him to even escape.

Soon, however, the police began to part, allowing a man to walk forward. Joker couldn't see his face, because of the spotlights shining right at his back, thus creating a shadow obscuring his figure. His feet stopped close to his face. "Huh," the man remarked with slight surprise. "Didn't think we've been chasing a kid all this time." He bent down, his hand grabbing a fistful of hair. He bit back a yell as the man rudely pulled his face up, bringing them face to face. Now he could see the man's face clearly. Gaunt, stone-faced with cold blue eyes, and neat black hair. A face of a man that, quite frankly, Joker didn't want to be near. It was a face of someone who, clearly, had otherwise more dark intentions.

Also, much to his great displeasure, the man was smirking.

"You have your teammate to thank for this. You...were sold out."

TakeYourTime

When Sae Niijima reached the police station, she realized that there

was a slight knot in her stomach, and her heart banging against her chest. Her feet carried her right past the doors and into the lobby, her destination being the open doors of an elevator, faster than what someone may have thought possible were she just strictly walking. Her palms were sweaty, her body was giving an occasional twitch of anxiety and fear, and she was constantly checking her wristwatch.

"They finally caught him," she muttered under her breath. "They actually caught the leader of the Phantom Thieves."

It left a bad taste in her mouth. Initially, she was put in charge of the operation and objective to capture the Phantom Thieves, though the Director of the SIU had grown impatient, so authority was transferred to someone else. It aggravated her greatly, knowing that she had once again been passed up the opportunity to go up the ladder, only to have that chance taken away. However, right now, she had to push her mindset out of there. Now that they had caught the Phantom, the leader of the notorious Phantom Thieves of Hearts, the group that had terrorized Japan, all that was left was to build a case against him. No doubt they were already trying to get information out of him in the interrogation room. Given that the room itself was underground, there were...many things that could happen here. Things that would otherwise be deemed unethical.

Then again, this wasn't a normal case, since even now, no one had any idea how exactly these illusive criminals were behind the mental shutdown cases, the psychotic breakdown incidents, or the cases involving Suguru Kamoshida, Ichiryusai Madarame, and Junya Kaneshiro. That was why Sae was here. She had to get to the truth of the matter, before anything unsavory happened to her only lead to this case. However...as she thought more and more about the matter, the more unsettled she became.

"Please," she whispered under her breath. "Don't let it be him."

The elevator doors opened. She took a deep intake of breath, and snapped her eyes open, letting her more serious nature take over. Without hesitation, she barreled out and went straight into the hallway. The interrogation room was in sight, guarded by two men. One was a police officer, stationed right outside the door, and the other was a detective, stone-faced with cold blue eyes, wearing a

black suit. He noticed her approach, as the hallway was silent and the clacking of her heels gave away her position, thus he stepped forward, holding up a hand. "Excuse me, but this area is off-"

"I'm Sae Niijima," she said swiftly, cutting the man off with an edge in her voice. She had no time for this crap. "From the Public Prosecutors Office."

The man quirked an eyebrow. "The Prosecutors Office?" he scoffed. "What business do you have here?"

"Just let me through; it's urgent," Sae answered curtly, pinching her nose. Already, she just wanted to shove the man out of the way and enter the room. She needed to confirm so many things, and she wasn't about to let some detective screw her over that chance. Especially if the person in that room was who she thought it was. "There's something I need to confirm with the suspect."

"Niijima-san," the detective decided to oh-so-gratefully remind her with cold indifference. "Need I remind you that this case is no longer in your jurisdiction? Besides, you-"

A voice called out from behind them. "Are you Prosecutor Sae Niijima?" The silver-haired woman turned and found a man, a higher-up from the look of him, walking toward her with arms folded. "There's a call from your director. Please hurry up and get it over with. To be perfectly frank, you're being an inconvenience."

Sae bit back a scowl. Of course, there it was. That sexist, overbearing attitude she had grown so used to seeing. The smug attitude only made it worse. If it weren't for the fact that she had learned how to keep herself in check, she would have slugged the man. As he said, however, her cell phone in her bag began to whine. She removed it swiftly, answered the call, and pressed it to her ear.

[I thought I ordered you to stay on stand-by.]

"I'm responsible for this case," Sae spat out angrily, yet made sure to keep her voice level and as possibly in-line as possible. "Yet I'm not even allowed an interrogation?"

[I'm calling because I knew you'd bring it up.]

She shook her head. "I will not be convinced unless I confirm it for myself," she reaffirmed, and stated with a clear tone she normally never used. "This is MY case."

[Good luck to you, then. I won't be expecting much, though...]

With that, the call ended. Sae felt quite bitter with how the call came out, but otherwise felt somewhat relieved. After all, her director had more or less gave her permission to interrogate the Phantom. As she slipped her phone back into her bag, the higher-up officer spoke, "Ah, Prosecutor. I forgot to mention something important. Your time will be cut short. We can't have you talking with him for long." Sae bit her lip. She understood why. The Phantom was an unknown individual who used unknown means. He brainwashed, killed, and his methods were practically unknown. Currently, she believed that he was using Wakaba Isshiki's Cognitive Research, though how a mental perception of one's surroundings could be used to actually kill someone, or make them go crazy, was beyond her. Regardless, she gave a reluctant nod of understanding. "It's for your own sake. His methods are unknown. After all, we don't even know if its safe to simply meet and speak with him."

"...I understand."

With that, she turned on her heel, and walked towards the interrogation room door. The officer was kind enough to open the door for her, though he stood for a moment, as if asking whether or not he would have to accompany her, should things get hairy. Sae, however, shook her head. Afterwards, she stepped inside, and the door closed behind her. The interrogation room was dimly lit, but well enough to illuminate most of the room. It was at least slightly bigger than a cell, with steel plated walls as to prevent any...unusual attempts of escape. Like most interrogation rooms, it had a table and two chairs, each on opposing sides. Hanging from the ceiling was a light bulb, and hooked up on the corner was a camera, no doubt to record what happened. As she moved to sit in the chair opposing the suspect, she took a look at him.

Her fears became true, as her heart nearly dropped, as had her

face. "...no matter how much I wanted to deny it," she said in sadness, her red eyes staring at the table rather than at the Phantom. "I thought it might have been you, Akira-kun."

The Phantom, Akira Kurusu, was a teenager, sixteen years old. His hair was a frizzy mess of black, barely coming down to the nape of his neck. His glasses, which he had no need for since he has 20/20 vision, were nowhere to be seen on him. He wore the traditional Shujin Academy uniform, albeit modified to his own tastes. Rather than a turtleneck sweater like many of the students, he wore a dress shirt with a black and red striped tie hanging loosely around his neck, and the black blazer left open. Below, his black and red plaid slacks were slightly ruffled, and his bag was gone, not that she expected it to be there. However, his form was...horrible. His skin was pale, water dripping from his face and mixed with sweat, eyes tired with dark rings and slightly bloodshot, bruises clear on his face, especially horrible on his left eye which was swollen, and cuff marks were clearly evident on his wrists.

Upon hearing his name, Akira raised his head, eyes tired and slightly hazy. Recognition flashed, as his eyes widened slightly, and looked a bit more lively, in contrast to how he looked when she saw him, defeated and brutalized. "Sae-san..."

Sae gave a small smile, whether because of her attachment to him, or because of her developed status as his guardian rather than as his proverbial guardian. She then noticed the syringe lying on the ground, a small pool of liquid underneath. Instantly, a scowl formed on her face. "Bastards," she snarled before she turned back to Akira, leaning forward with concern. "Are you alright, Akira-kun?"

"I'll live," he answered, albeit weakly. "Although...those guys really hit hard, don't they?"

In spite of the shape he was in, a smile, just so fitting of him, a smile that showed only the face of one who went about life like it was a game; a trickster's smile was clear on his face. In all honesty, were it not for that, Sae would have been worried. It looked like he was coherent, so she would be able to get the answers she needed. For now, she would put aside her familial attachment to him, and focus on the task at hand. "Akira-kun...at lot's happened, and almost

anything can happen in here," she told him seriously. "Things that I can't stop. That's why," Sae leaned back in her chair, though she kept in eye contact with him. "I need you tell me everything, as honestly as you can. We don't have much time to talk."

He gave a slow nod.

Sae smiled slightly, though it barely lasted before she began questioning him. "What was your objective, Akira-kun? Why cause such a major incident? Quite honestly, I didn't treat this business like it was some sort of prank, or joke. But I could never form a prosecution case, because I lacked the facts." She paused, and closed her eyes, letting out a sigh. "Because I lacked the knowledge of the method."

"And you wouldn't ever know, either," Akira responded rather cheekily for someone in his position. However, she gave a light chuckle.

"True...after all, who would believe reports of another ' *world* ?' It would be hard to be convinced about such ludicrous claims just from a few reports. So...Akira-kun, answer me truthfully."

The prosecutor, and probation officer of Akira Kurusu, the Phantom and leader of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts, leaned forward, and asked the fated question.

"When and where did you find out about that world?"

TO BE CONTINUED...

First Heist: Akira Kurusu

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It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

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"Tricksters."

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

First Heist: Akira Kurusu

"Fucking brat...I'll sue you for this!"

The slight jostle of the train startled 16-year-old Akira Kurusu, his drowsy and tired state now thrown into an alert form. His eyes widened, and his heart was beating rapidly, though seeing the inside

of the train car, crammed and filled to the brim with various people, set him immediately at ease. He breathed a heavy sigh of relief. "Just a dream," he muttered, closing his eyes. "From back then..."

It had been at least a few months since the day he was arrested, and so far, his life hadn't been so great. His parents' relationship wasn't exactly the best, even before he was given a record. All they did was argue, even about the littlest things. His father was a small-time accountant at a local bank firm, but was easy to get along with. His mother, on the other hand, worked tirelessly day and night at the diner, where she frequently dealt with customers. She insisted that one must work hard to get ahead of life, and constantly tried to push that lifestyle unto him. His father didn't exactly agree with that, and was against it from the get-go, hence putting forth the strain. After he was arrested, it got even worse. His mother was disappointed and yelled at him, even when he tried to explain his side. His father tried to defend him, and nearly succeeded in doing so.

Unfortunately, in a small town like his hometown, word got around fast. The faculty was informed, and he was expelled. Most of his friends turned their backs on him, and a lot of people thought he was just another problem child.

Akira would have been run down to the ground, if not for the fact that he didn't let it bother him. From his viewpoint, society told him, this is what you get for sticking your nose into someone else's business. This is what happens for people who don't know any better. He refused to believe that he was in the wrong, otherwise what was the point of even agreeing to undergo probation? Regarding that matter, this proposition normally wouldn't have been offered to him, if not for the fact that the man in charge of his case was quite understanding and wanted to give him the benefit of a doubt.

The rules were pretty simple; stay out of trouble, and his probation would be lifted, and the possibility of his record being cleared almost certain, even though it would take a long time. He was given two choices, based on what his father told him. He would either live with the owner of a cafe who their friend frequented, or the daughter of a family friend. He chose the latter, as the idea of living with someone he didn't know wasn't exactly what he had in mind, though neither was his current option. All he knew about this person was that she

lived with her younger sister, who was in high school, and had a high-paying job in the government. On top of that, she was also assigned as his probation officer as well, meaning that she would be monitoring his activities almost every day. Again, not exactly what he had in mind, but he wasn't in a position to refuse. It was either this or Juvenile Hall.

The train eventually reached the station, and opened its doors to him. Akira moved out with the flood of people, and eventually emerged out of Shibuya station, entering the station square. He was promptly amazed, as no matter where he looked, there were several people, packed into a tight crowd or another, traversing the street or walking down the sidewalk or simply hanging out at certain spots. "It's so cluttered," he thought aloud, having no choice but to enter the hazardous pack of migrating individuals. He took out his phone, looking at the message he received from who would be his new guardian for the year. *'Hachiko Statue...where is that?'*

As soon as he entered the middle of the street, however, he stopped when he noticed an unusual icon on his phone. It was red, bearing a black insignia resembling an eye with a star inside. *'W-what?'* he frowned in confusion. *'What is this? So creepy... When did this install on my phone?'* He didn't recall seeing this before when he checked it before he hopped on the train bound for Shibuya Station, so it must have installed while he was on board...though how? As far as he knew, he didn't recall going to any new websites other than the ones he usually browses through, and he wasn't given any notices. Maybe it was a software update? Akira wasn't able to investigate any further, however, as the app suddenly expanded, covering up almost half of the screen. *'What the...'*

Akira tapped the now blown-up icon on his screen, though nothing happened. He wondered if it was a bug or virus of some kind. Either way, he was getting rid of it. It was way too creepy, and for all he knew, it could mess up his phone, like ho wit was doing now. Sighing, he looked up, and suddenly became aware of the change of the world around him.

Everything had stopped.

The few passing cars. The people passing through the sidewalks.

The customers of the stores within view. The two birds above him that had taken off into flight. Even the large crowd of people surrounding him, all of which were either walking or running, were frozen in place. Behind him was a man talking on the phone, his mouth wide open as if in mid-sentence. Two girls had giant grins stuck to their faces, their left and right foot respectively held up in the air, just a foot above the ground. He grew startled, and looked around. Everywhere he looked, it was the same. It was like time had ceased to function.

"W-what's going on?" he questioned. "H-hello? Anyone?"

He called out, but no one answered. In fact, his voice seemed to echo, as if he were atop a mountain or inside a tunnel. He continued to look around, hoping to at least find someone who was also experiencing this anomaly. When he turned to face the Station Square, his eyes found something odd. There, burning within the crowd, was a brilliant, dark blue fire. *'A fire?'* Akira questioned, uneasy and confused. *'In the middle of the street?'* Further adding to his confusion, the flames continued to rise and build, slowly forming into a shape. He couldn't see it quite clearly, but it vaguely had a human shape, and what looked like wings spreading out. While most would have been freaked out, like he was earlier, Akira couldn't help but stare at it, slightly breathless. He wasn't sure why, but he could have sworn he saw something inside the flames. Something familiar. And the shape...oddly, he could almost make it out.

Then, crimson flames burned with the blue inferno, forming into what appeared to be a face; a wicked grin, and slit-like eyes. Then the torrent of flames parted, revealing a face that made Akira's eyes widen to the size of dinner plates.

His own face, bearing a toothy, maddening grin, the glasses discarded, and golden yellow eyes.

Then, like magic, everything ceased to be. As soon as he blinked, time had resumed. The blue flames and the Akira-lookalike vanished. The crowd continued to walk, unperturbed as if the sudden freeze of their moment had never happened. The frizzy-haired teen didn't understand what had just happened, as he gave another look around to see if there was anything out of the ordinary,

but found none. *'I must be tired,'* he decided, giving a tired sigh as his shoulders sagged, shaking his head. He looked back at his phone, and found that the weird app had reverted back to its normal size. Now that he thought about it...that unusual moment happened when the app appeared, didn't it? *'Well, better safe than sorry.'*

He tapped the icon with his index, and then slid it down to the trashcan, where it proceeded to fall inside and shrink before it was out of sight, and deleted. Slipping it back into his pocket, Akira resumed his search for his guardian, and peered for anything even remotely resembling a dog statue. Eventually, he found it, as he caught side of it as soon as he reached the other side of the street. To his embarrassment, it was back at the Station Square, surrounded by several people, no doubt hanging around for whatever reason, and several trees. He made his way across the street once again, returning to the square, and reached the Hachiko Statue. Akira did a survey of the area, and found no one that seemed to remotely fit the description of someone who had a high-paying job. If there was anyone who fit that look, it might have been that politician standing atop the cardboard box with the green sash, making a public campaign speech.

'Okay, let's see,' Akira thought back to what little details he knew. *'My probation officer slash guardian is a woman, has a younger sister, has a job in the government...so what would she look like?'*

If need be, he would have to ask around. Sure, he might receive a few odd stares, but if he gave a brief explanation, like he had just moved here for certain reasons and was looking for his caretaker, then it might lessen the painful glare he would no doubt receive, depending on who he asked. However, just as he was about to go to the nearest person, a voice spoke out from behind him.

"Kurusu-kun? Akira Kurusu-kun?"

Akira turned, and immediately found who he was looking for. A woman stood behind him, bearing long gray hair, asymmetrically parted on her right side and mauve red. She wore a black business suit, which seemed to be quite fitting on her slim form, with a black turtleneck. Her blazer's cuffs and the lower part had a clamshell-like design to them. Accessory-wise, she wore a necklace of a section

sign (§), earrings, and a few dark hair clips found above her right ear. Her hand was on her bag, strapped to her shoulder, and thus showing off her violet fingernails.

Going by her appearance...she might be the one he was looking for. Although, just to be sure...

"It's nice to meet you," he said, bowing his head politely.

The woman smiled somewhat, though being around so many adults, Akira could easily tell that the smile was hardly genuine. If anything, it was troubled and strained. "Hm, you're younger than I'd thought you would be," she mused. She then introduced herself properly. "My name is Sae Niijima. I'll be your caretaker and probation officer for the next year."

'So...this is Sae Niijima,' he thought with curiosity. *'She looks pretty young...maybe a few years older than me. Although,'* the frizzy-haired teen noted. *'It doesn't seem like she's happy about this arrangement, either.'*

"Well," Sae said, her tone somewhat irritated. Whether it was about him or something else, he wasn't sure. For now, he kept silent. "Let's get going. I'm sure you're exhausted."

TakeYourTime

Flashback, three weeks ago

"W-what?" Sae blinked, stopping in her tracks. The door leading to the house remained open, and she would have closed it were it not for the fact that the person who had just called her had said something that took her completely off guard. "I-I'm sorry, could you repeat that for me, please?"

[I said, Sae-san, I need you to look after my son.]

The young prosecutor tried to form words, but they remained stuck in her throat. For the life of her, she wasn't sure what the hell the man was talking about. She quickly snapped out of her stupor, and closed the door behind her. "You're going to have to clarify for me

here, Kurusu-san," she asked, stepping inside the living room and setting her purse on the night stand. "You called me not two minutes ago, and you're asking me to look after your son for no apparent reason? I don't..."

*[R-right, sorry... *sigh* It's been really stressful. My wife and I are...well, we're about to file for a divorce.]*

"I see...so what does this have to do with your son?" There was a slight pause on the other end of the line. Sae couldn't help but feel both worried and at the same time curious. The man was a good friend of her father's before he died, and while she remembered little of him, he was regarded highly. If her memory was right, he was an accountant at a well-known banking firm. Well respected by his peers as well, though she only knew this about the few calls the man made to her. "Kurusu-san?"

[...Akira-kun was...arrested the other night.]

Sae's eyes widened. "A-arrested?" she asked, startled. Instantly, a whirlwind of thoughts blew through her mind. Akira Kurusu, to her knowledge, was a first-year in high school, but that was all she knew. Going by that one sentence, she could make a number of judgements, but for now, she wanted to hear what Kurusu-san wanted to tell her. "How...did that happen?"

[According to the police, my son attacked a man, unprovoked, in front of a woman. If it were any other child, I might have believed that, but...I know Akira-kun. He wouldn't hurt someone for just no reason. He told me that the man was harassing the woman because he was drunk, but the police took his side. My wife...sorry, ex-wife, thinks I raised him wrong. That we screwed up.]

The woman sat down on the couch, taking a moment to process this information. "Kurusu-san...how old is Akira-kun, if I may ask?"

[Sixteen.]

"So he's a minor," Sae concluded. "If that's the case, then he should be allowed to be put on a probation period, isn't that correct?"

*[Y-yes, that's right. Normally, we would have him stay here and I'd report to whatever officer they assign him, but...well, everyone thinks that Akira-kun's a problem child. Worse, somehow, his school found out, and they expelled him. *sigh* I want him to have a good education, and I...I can't provide him that here.]*

"If that's the case, then why not move?" she inquired. "As I understand it, the minimal requirement of probation is one year. I'm sure there must be at least one school in Japan that would accept him, regardless of the fact that he has a record now."

[Well...the detective was understanding, but unfortunately, this thing with my wife is...well, I don't want Akira-kun to be around that. I called a friend of mine earlier, and he said that the owner of a cafe he frequents would be willing to take him in...]

The prosecutor quirked an eyebrow. That was strange. If Kurusu-san had already arranged for someone to look after Akira, then why was he calling her? And asking her of all people to look after him... Suddenly, realization struck her, and sat up straight. "You...want him to stay with me?" she asked, incredulous. "B-but I..."

[I know, I know...I'm asking you a lot. It-it's just, I don't trust a stranger to look after Akira-kun.]

"I'm a stranger as well," Sae tried to reason. "I know barely anything about your son."

[But I know you, if only a little. Sae-san...I know you still hate Niijima-kun, but please...I'm willing to pay for Akira's expenses, if need be. That way, you don't worry about having to pay. Just...please, Sae-san.]

There was a pleading tone, begging truly. The woman winced, unable to hear a grown man beg a woman who was at least twenty or so years younger than him to do something, in spite of it being something serious. She pondered the pros and cons. On one hand, having another person to look after, especially someone she didn't know at all, would be quite troublesome. While she didn't want to doubt Kurusu-san, she had Makoto to think about. She was the only family she had left after the deaths of their parents, and having a

boy in the house, a hormonal teenage boy at that, was just begging for trouble. Additionally, being his guardian meant that she would no doubt be his probational officer, on top of being a prosecutor, which in turn meant more tiresome work. On the other hand...

After several seconds of silence, nearly a full minute, Sae responded. "...alright. Just let me know when to expect him."

TakeYourTime

The drive to Sae Niijima's house wasn't too long. Traffic didn't seem to be too horrible, though Akira was treated to his first taste of just how tightly packed Tokyo's major city streets were. People came in throes, and cars were constantly on the move, getting from place to place. The ride was also rather quiet, as neither had spoken during the whole trip there. Sae kept her eyes on the road, and Akira kept mostly to himself, staring out at the outside world moving quickly through the window. Eventually, after about an hour or so, they arrived.

"We're here," Sae announced. He nodded, and grabbed his bag from the backseat, leaving the car. To his surprise, the house was...quite luxurious. It seemed to be quite expensive, as did a few other houses he saw as he looked around, and it appeared to be a two-story house as well, predominantly colored white with clear windows. "Well, this will be your home for the next year, Kurusu-kun," his probation officer informed him, walking past him and heading for the door. When she noticed that he was standing still, she frowned. "What's the matter?"

"...it's big," he answered simply.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, being a prosecutor has its perks," she told him, much to his interest and shock. She was a prosecutor? At that age? He had to admit, he was impressed. She must have worked tirelessly to reach such a position, especially given how rough men were on women in the major government workplaces. "A high pay being one of them. Come on, I'll show you your room." He nodded, and followed her inside. Sae unlocked the door, allowing them entrance. He slipped off his shoes, and put on the shoes that were left out at the cupboard to place his. Then he

entered the living room. Much like the outside, it looked to be quite expensive. Had he not known any better, he would have compared it to a five-star apartment building.

He didn't have long to admire the scenery, however. He continued to follow Sae, moving up the stairs and up to the second floor. In contrast to the first floor, the second seemed to be where the rooms were, as he found four doors, two of which he assumed to be Sae's room and her sister's. The fourth door was either probably the bathroom or a guest room, and the last was his. "The doors to the left are mine and Makoto's," Sae told him, confirming his suspicions. Shortly after saying this, she turned and shot him a glare. "I'll just say this; if I catch you in either my room or my sister's, I'm kicking you out. Understand?" He gave a nod of acknowledgement, understanding the threat. Sae seemed satisfied, and then walked over to one of the remaining doors. With a turn of the knob, she pushed it open, revealing a plain and empty room, having only a bed with another door, possibly the closet or something along those lines, and several boxes, which he recognized as his belongings. "This will be your room. Your stuff arrived yesterday, so you're free to unpack."

"...thanks."

Sae sighed. "Wasn't like I had much of a choice," she said tiredly before she crossed her arms. "Now...I got the gist of your situation from your father, but...I want to hear your side of the story." Akira furrowed his brow. Why was she asking him about that? She must have heard more about it from his father, shouldn't she? He wanted to ask a reason for this sudden question, but her gaze told him everything. She wanted to hear everything from his own mouth.

Reluctantly, Akira opened his mouth to speak...

TakeYourTime

"Just get in the car!"

"Stop it!"

It was already late at night, and Akira was exhausted. He had spent the day helping a friend with his assignment, though rather than what was supposed to be leading to late in the afternoon became late in the day completely. His body was sagging, and his eyes were droopy. His head hurt from all of that work he had to do, even though nearly half of it was done by his friend. His body felt so heavy that he wanted to fall asleep. His friend's parents offered to let him stay for the night as thanks, but he said he was okay.

Had Akira known what was waiting for him...he would have accepted the offer.

He was two blocks away from his home when he heard the sound of arguing. It was a man and a woman, and not too far away given how he could somewhat hear them clearly. He frowned, and shook his head in disappointment. All adults did was argue, just like his parents...was it really so hard for them to try and reach a moot point? Unfortunately, those thoughts faded away instantly as he reached the corner, and found that it sure as hell was anything but an argument. A man was in front of a car, standing on the sidewalk while struggling to keep a hold on a woman. He couldn't seem the clearly, but if the man's tone was anything to go by, he was clearly not happy.

"How dare you cross me!"

The woman struggled, trying to break away from his grasp. "S-stop it!" she pleaded. "Let me go! No!"

"Don't give me that shit!"

As Akira drew closer, he could see them more clearly. The man was bald, wearing a black suit with a dress shirt in plain view, and orange-tinted sunglasses settled over his face, while the woman had brown hair, falling down to her shoulders, a white blouse and a plain black skirt with leggings and black heels. The man's face was slightly pink, and even from where he stood, the frizzy-haired teen could smell the unmistakable, pungent scent of alcohol. 'He's drunk!' he realized, and became uneasy. The woman was clearly in trouble, and he could help...but a drunk was the last thing he needed to deal with. While he has not experienced what it would be like to be on the

receiving end of a drunk's actions, he knew that it wasn't ever good. Also, for some reason, the man looked familiar, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Either way...he couldn't just ignore this!

With a resolve in mind, Akira moved in to confront the man. As he did, the drunk struggled with the woman in his arms. "Tch, what a waste of my time!" he slurred in anger. "You think your worth wasting my time?! Huh?!"

"I-I'll call the police!" the woman resisted.

In spite of this threat, the drunk didn't seem even the least bit worried. "Feh, go ahead," he told her, smirking. "Call 'em if you want...they won't do a damn thing. The police are my bitches! They won't take you seriously."

"S-stop!"

Akira had just reached the foot of the curb when he heard the sirens wailing. He looked around, and noticed there were a few lights on, though the curtains were drawn. The drunk gave a scowl, and spat out, "So someone called the cops?" He then turned back to the woman, and grabbed her by the wrist. "Get in the car, woman!" Once more, the woman yelled at him to stop, and tried to resist. "Stupid, moronic fools like you just need to shut up, and let me steer this country!"

Finally, the teen came up to the sidewalk, and glared. Defiantly, he yelled, "Hey!"

The shout caught the man's attention. The woman's face lit up, thankful that someone had managed to hear her and was trying to intervene, but the drunk didn't look the least bit pleased. Underneath the shades, he gave the boy the most dirtiest look he had ever seen, bridled with rage that someone was standing up to him. "The hell are you looking at?" he growled, turning to face Akira. "This ain't a show, brat...get lost!"

"I will," the boy glared back. "As soon as you leave her alone!"

The drunk didn't hear him. It was more accurate to say that he outright ignored him and turned back to the woman. "See? This happened because your so damned slow!" he slurred. "Now, get...in the damn...car!"

The woman looked terrified as he reached for her. She tried to flee, but he grabbed her by the wrist, and pulled. The pull was strong enough that one button of her blouse was sent flying off, showing off a slight glimpse of her bra. He roughly grabbed her by the shoulders, and began to pull her towards the car. She tried to get out of his grip, but he was far too strong. She looked at the boy, eyes begging. "H-help me! Please!"

He didn't even waste time. With clenched fists, Akira stomped over, and grabbed the man by the shoulder. "I said, leave her alone!" With a pull, he pried the man off of her. The drunk looked even more angered by his defiance, but he didn't even have the time to threaten him as he began to stumble on his feet. His foot tripped over itself, and as he fell his body turned at an angle. To both the woman and Akira's fear, he hit the curb right on the head. At first, the man was unresponsive, not moving, leading Akira to become fearful. He stared at his hands in horror, wondering if he killed a man, but then saw the drunk slowly get up. His glasses were gone, left on the sidewalk while he gripped his face, blood leaking from a small wound on his forehead. As he got on his knee, the man glared at Akira with utter loathing and contempt. Weakly, the boy backed away. "I...I'm sorry, I-"

"Y-you..." the man growled, animosity radiating off of him. "Fucking brat...I'll sue you for this!"

TakYourTime

After he was finished retelling his story, Sae folded her arms, a hand at her chin. For the longest time, she was silent, and had never interrupted him. She silently listened, giving slight nods to show that she was following. Eventually, she spoke up, breaking the tense silence that had begun to make him uncomfortable. "So...you saw a man, who was clearly drunk, harassing a woman, and tried to intervene," she recapped. "However, he hit his head on the curb, and promptly sued you. After that, you were arrested." He gave a

nod of confirmation. She continued on, "Once the faculty learned about this, you were expelled from your old school, and as a result, you had to move here to Tokyo, as part of your probation." The woman then shook her head, giving a sigh. "You've had it rough...although, maybe that's what you get for trying to step into an adult's business."

Akira winced, and looked away, unable to meet her gaze. So...that was it? He was just supposed to watch it all happen? Stand by and do nothing?

"Look," Sae said, regaining his attention. "The only reason I'm looking after you is because my father and your parents knew each other. I have enough on my plate with my job and looking after Makoto as it is, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't cause any unnecessary trouble. I am your probation officer for the year, after all."

"A whole year..." That's right...he nearly forgot. The probation period lasts a year, doesn't it? Meaning he would be under the same roof as her for 12 months, along with another girl. As if it wasn't awkward already, living in the same space as a prosecutor.

"At any rate, it's best if you unpack and go to bed. We're going to introduce ourselves to the faculty at Shujin Academy, the school you'll be attending, tomorrow." The woman's red eyes narrowed at him as she folded her arms, giving him a cross look. "There's rarely a place that accepts someone like you. Try to understand that." He gave a solemn nod. Sae seemed to be satisfied, and then took out something from her pocket. She walked up to him, and held out her hand. Gratefully, he accepted it, giving it a quick examination. It appeared to be a key with a red accessory. "This is your room key. There's only one, so don't lose it." She looked as if she wanted to say something else, though her phone began to rang. Sae took it out, and gave Akira another look before she walked away, pressing the phone to ear. "Hello? Oh, Makoto. Yeah, don't worry, I'll be home for dinner tonight..."

Her voice faded as she walked down the stairwell, vanishing from sight. Akira's stare lingered fro a while before he turned to the door leading to his room, and stepped inside, closing it behind him. As

soon as it locked into place, his beg fall from his shoulder and hit the floor while his back leaned against the door, staring up at the ceiling with a weary look.

'Well...this ought to be an interesting year...'

TO BE CONTINUED...

A/N: Hey everyone, Demons Anarchy of Pride here. Glad to see that everyone's enjoying the story so far! I had to admit, I wasn't expecting this much of a reception. Still, makes me happy. Anyway, as you saw, Akira's life has finally begun, though its quite the rough start. I'm hoping I got Sae's characterization down right, and not made her how Sojiro was in the beginning of the game. If anyone thinks I have any problems with how I made Sae in this chapter, please tell me as soon as you can!

Now...regarding the ideas that are going to be in this story. One premise has already been done; namely Akira living with the Niijima family. If I remember right, he was originally going to be a neighbor to them, but instead, I went with the idea of him actually living with them. Now, normally, this would cause some concerns, since the idea of a boy and girl who are not related in any way living together is usually frowned upon, so I made Sae into his probation officer, on top of being a prosecutor. I hope that idea sticks, though. To be honest, I don't know if its actually possible, and I'm trying to branch out here.

Also...yes. Hifumi Togo is going to join the Phantom Thieves. I did saw that I was going to implement some of the ideas Atlus originally had in mind, didn't I? I have her starter Persona worked out, but not her Ultimate, or her outfit yet. *sigh* Work in progress, ya know?

Well, that's all from me. I hoped you enjoyed this chapter.

Oh wait, almost forgot...when I publish the next chapter, there will be one detail you will notice, but fret not...just because I'm making altercations does not mean I am removing any content whatsoever. The only changes are Hifumi joining the Phantom Thieves, Akira living with Sae and Makoto, and one other thing, but other than that, the story remains unchanged.

That's it for now, everybody...now I bid you adieu~

Second Heist: Blue Prison

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Since time immemorial...they were known as,

"Tricksters."

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

Second Heist: Blue Prison

"...done."

Akira panted slightly as he sat on his bed, sweat slightly caking his skin as he stared at his new room. Before he could actually unpack, he had to clean it up. He found a thin layer of dust atop the desk that

had been given to him, and the walls were somewhat musty as well, so he decided to give it a quick clean-up. It took about half an hour or so before he went to unpack. First, he gathered all of his clothes, separating them into the proper sections so as to not get confused, and placed them in the dresser he was also provided with. Then he unpacked the materials he was given by the few friends that he still had after his arrest, though they weren't much. They did make for nice decorations, brightening up the otherwise bland room. Lastly, he placed the rest of the boxes into the closet, which had a few items that he otherwise didn't really need right now.

Rather than be in his uniform any further, Akira had chosen to switch into more comfortable clothes, that being a plain black shirt with baggy sweats. It was his lounge-wear in a sense, leaving only his feet barefoot.

The frizzy-haired teen gave a small noise of accomplishment before he laid himself down on the bed, looking out the window. The blinds were still up, but through the small slits, he could see the sky turning light orange. It was already growing dark, it seemed. How long had he been unpacking? Well, at any rate, he was dead tired, and so exhausted. He felt like going to sleep right then and there. Then again, Sae had told him to get some rest, since they would be going to his new school tomorrow in order to properly fill out the paperwork to finalize his transfer there. As he thought back on his circumstances, he frowned.

"Fucking brat...I'll sue you for this!"

'I'm not in the wrong here,' he thought, still concerned about his probation officer's words earlier. *'There was no way I could just let that happen.'* At any rate...he may as well go to sleep. There was a long day ahead of him, after all. He pulled out his phone, checking to see if he received any new messages, and to his confusion, the strange app from earlier was still present on his phone. *'I thought I got rid of that,'* Akira knew he had. That weird sensation and...thing...from earlier was still fresh in his mind. *'So creepy...it looks like an eye.'* He tapped the icon, and dragged it down to the trash bin on the bottom of his phone. As he put his phone away, he closed his eyes. *'So tired...'*

After a few minutes, Akira fell into the world of sleep...yet oddly, as he lost consciousness, he could have sworn he saw chains dancing around him, twisting and curling as he faded into unconsciousness.

TakeYourTime

[I hear you've become a probation officer, on top of being a guardian for a young man on probation.]

Sae winced as she briefly pulled away from her laptop. She had been going through the details of her latest case before her director called. At first, she assumed it was about the case, though it appeared that it was about Akira. She hadn't expected him to find out...at least, so quickly. "Yes, sir," she answered after a moment of hesitation. "I promise, it won't affect my-"

[Relax. If at all anything, your decision is admirable. I must admit, you're becoming a model individual, looking after both your younger sister and a problem child.]

"That's..."

[Anyway, how is that case coming along?]

"I'm reviewing the details as we speak," Sae answered. Thankfully, her Director had changed the topic of discussion, much to her relief. "So far, nothing seems out of the ordinary. Well, other than the fact that the victim remembers nothing of when he went ballistic in the middle of that meeting."

[Indeed...it appears that more and more people are becoming afflicted with these unknown cases of psychotic breakdowns. At best, it's just a minor coincidence...still, best to keep an open mind when investigating the matter. Just to be on the safe side, I've called Akechi-kun. He'll be assisting you on the matter.]

At the mention of the name "Akechi," Sae was glad she wasn't speaking with the Director face-to-face, otherwise he would have seen the cringe on her face. "I understand, sir." With that, and after a brief farewell, the call ended, leaving for a look of exasperation to appear on her face as she slipped her phone back into her pocket.

"Good grief...he relies far too much on Akechi-kun." Goro Akechi, the supposed second coming of the detective prince, Naoto Shirogane, was a charismatic figure who was quite popular with the media, and gathered much support, though his actions in the past did draw the ire of the police force, namely due to his methods and way of thinking. Sae actually respected him somewhat, and would have been glad to work with him...were it not for the fact that, despite him being 17, he tried to ask her out to dinner.

Don't get her wrong, she was quite flattered, and he was certainly handsome, and had a commendable attitude...but there was something unnerving about Akechi that she didn't quite understand, like a nagging feeling in the back of her mind. As someone who trusted her instincts, she naturally denied every attempt he threw at her. It wouldn't be the last time she saw him, however, as the Director frequently called him to investigate matters. Right now, the case involved a CEO of a big-time corporation that was in competition with Okumura Foods, who had suddenly undergone a psychotic breakdown, and went ballistic during a corporation meeting. Naturally, the Prosecutors Office was called into compile a case, though there was something about it that piqued Sae's interest. Namely, the fact that this wasn't the only mention of a psychotic breakdown happening for no reason.

"I wonder..."

"I'm home!"

Sae's eyes traveled to the entrance, where a young girl entered the living room after she closed the door. It was a girl, a year or so older than Akira, with brown hair in a bob cut with blunt bangs and a braided headband. Her eyes were the same mauve red color as Sae's. .She wore what appeared to be the Shujin Academy uniform, only without the standard blazer. Instead, she wore a black halter vest over a long sleeve white shirt with a turtleneck. She also wore a black and red pleated plaid skirt. She had black tights and brown ankle boots.

"You're home awfully late," Sae remarked, a smile spreading across her lips. "And after that complaint about you wanting me to be home for dinner."

Makoto Niijima, Sae's younger sister, giggled abashed as she set her schoolbag on the rack. "Sorry," she apologized. "I had last minute student council business to take care of."

"It's fine." A brief exchange later, and the two siblings began having dinner. Though it was hardly anything fancy, being a simple curry dish, Sae could honestly say that she enjoyed it. It was at times like this that she could enjoy being away from the workspace, away from the sexism and expectations of her damned peers. She glanced at the empty seat by the table. *'Strange,'* she thought. *'I thought Kurusu-kun would have joined us. Hm...he must be tired.'* "So, how as school today?"

"Same as usual," Makoto answered, taking a spoonfull of her curry and downing it. "The workload was a bit much today. I'm guessing its because of that transfer student we're getting." The girl looked up at her sister, curious. "Speaking of that transfer student...I noticed we had an extra pair of shoes in the cupboard. A boy's, at that. Did that boy you're supposed to be looking after come today?"

Sae nodded. "That's right," she confirmed. "Akira Kurusu. He'll be a second-year at Shujin, starting on Monday. I've already given him the ground rules, though."

"About Kurusu-kun," Makoto set her fork and spoon down, leaning on the table with her shoulders a bit as she tilted her head. "You said he has a record?" Her sister nodded again, leading for the student council president of Shujin to furrow her brow in thought. Sae hadn't told her much, other than that his parents were divorced shortly after the incident, and regarding said incident, he attacked a man. The details were murky, and while she wanted to ask Sae, she didn't want to accidentally step on a landmine that could potentially blow up into something she didn't want to get into. Instead, she settled on Sae herself. "Will you be okay, Sis?" she asked, surprising Sae, who looked up from her dinner. "I mean, you already have enough on your plate with me and your job, especially with the case you're working on. Are you sure you're gonna be okay, being someone's probation officer?"

The young prosecutor gave a light shrug. "That all depends on Kurusu-kun," she answered simply. "If he doesn't cause any trouble,

everything should be fine." She then smiled softly. "Enough about me, though, Makoto. You should worry more about yourself. After all, once you're done at Shujin, there's college to think about. Speaking of which, have you decided which one you want to enroll at yet?"

"Hm...I'm thinking about..."

TakeYourTime

When Akira opened his eyes, he saw blue.

Brilliant, vibrant, aquamarine blue.

"What...?"

His eyes began to drift. The ceiling was unfamiliar, as were the walls. They were padded, yet looked quite comfortable, marked by few golden tailings. However, the scenery around him was wrong. His belongings were missing, even the desk and dresser. The nightstand was also gone. The bed also felt uncomfortable as well, more solid and hard than the comfy, white fluff he had fallen asleep on earlier. Slowly, he sat up, also noticing the lack of comforters on his body. He looked around again, and noticed that the room was quite small, barely bigger than the size of an apartment's kitchen. What was even stranger still were the shackles that hanged from the ceiling, dangling from black chains. In the background, he could also hear music playing from what sounded like a speaker of some sort, a wonderful female voice singing in tune with the piano, performing a wonderful opera.

'What's going on?' he questioned, frowning. *'I could have sworn I was...'*

"Hmhmhm...what an interesting guest we have this time around..."

Akira's eyes widened as he whipped around. His confusion continued to grow. A series of bars, reminiscent to a cell door, obstructed him while the door itself was left open, leaving him free to leave. Outside the cell doors was a circular room, also colored that mysterious, yet comforting shade of blue. Several other cells lined

the walls, sirens attached at the center of the ceiling, no doubt where the music was being broadcasted. The floor was made entirely of brick, though within the center was a blue carpet with a golden design; of what, he couldn't quite make out. However, what caught his interest most were what stood at the center of the room, directly facing him.

There were two people. One was a young girl, looking no older than twelve or thirteen, bearing slightly pale skin and large, golden eyes, which seemed to stare at him with an unknown intensity. She was rather small, and had a slim form just by going by the black gloves and leggings she wore. She wore a velvet blue dress, with a black design at the front, held in place by four golden circles, two on each side. Her hair, which came down to the hem of her dress, was platinum blonde, held in place by a velvet blue hairband, a silver butterfly wing on the right and left side, directly behind her ear. In her hand was an abnormally large book with a black binding. The other was an eldery man, who sat leisurely at a desk, which sat in the very center of the room. He wore a fine black suit, which fit well on his slim form, while his hands, hidden by white gloves, were folded and sitting underneath his chin. He was bizarre, in that his back was hunched forward, and his nose was abnormally long. A wide, toothy smile was plastered across his face, so wide that it would have threatened to break his face in half. He was also bald, with what little hair remaining on his dome being finely combed and swept back behind his ears.

Akira stared at them with confusion. Who were they? What was this place? Was he in prison? The thought put him in a slight panic, given his predicament. He should have been at Sae's house sleeping, not in a cell. Although, he never heard of a prison block looking so blue, or that a desk sat in the very center of the block. He pushed himself off the bed, and cautiously stepped out of the cell, stopping just short of a few feet.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room, my dear young man," the old man greeted him, smile still present. "I am delighted to make your acquaintance. It has been so long since we've had a guest. Now, introductions. My name is Igor," he then gestured to the small girl next to the desk. "This is Lavenza. She is a resident of this place,

like myself."

The girl, now identified as Lavenza, gave a small smile as she bowed her head. "I am Lavenza. I am here to accompany you through this time."

Akira stared back, unable to answer her. Instead, he was only wracked with even more confusion. His hand touched his temple, grasping it as he felt the onset of a headache coming to plague him. "I...don't understand," he muttered. "I was in my room...how did I...?"

"Fear not," Igor told him. "You are fast asleep in the real world. I have summoned you, within your dreams." As he removed his head, the frizzy-haired teen stared, incredulous. A dream? This was a dream? Well...it certainly felt like it, but this was bizarre. Also, summoned? What did that even mean? What was even going on? "This place exists between dream and reality, mind and matter. It is a room that only those, who are bound by a contract, may enter." The long-nosed man paused, and then looked at the prison block, which he had referred to previously as the Velvet Room. "Still...how curious. To think that it would take the form of a prison..."

Akira's eyebrow rose. Why was he so surprised? If he ran the place, shouldn't he have known it would be a prison block? Seeing his confusion, Lavenza spoke up, "The Velvet Room's appearance reflects the state of our guest's heart," she told him, though as she spoke, her tone became saddened. "Thus, with you as our guest, it has taken this shape; a blue prison, and you, its prisoner."

"I...don't understand," he shook his head, still unable to process all of this. Prisoner? Reflecting his heart? What did any of this mean?

Igor, however, seemed to understand his frustration, and waved. "It may take some time to fully comprehend," he told him. The man gave a light chuckle, as if amused by something, before he crossed his leg. "We summoned you here to speak of important matters, my dear guest. Matters that may come to be pivotal in your future."

"Matters...?"

"Yes," Lavenza nodded. "The world is not as it should be. It is filled

with distortions. You may not realize it, or see it...however, in the coming of days, you will. When it does come, you must make a decision."

He frowned deeply. Akira didn't really understand what was going on...but for some reason, he listened intently. These people didn't seem like they were lying, and this feeling...how should he put it? This place...even though its appearance was rather dreary, something about it made him feel...at ease. Thus, calmly, and feeling his headache beginning to fade, he lowered his hand. "A decision?" he questioned. "What kind of decision?"

"What, indeed?" Igor chuckled. "As Lavenza has said, the world is not as it should be. Perhaps, if the discord of man proves far too great...ruin will fall upon this world, and you will be forced to stand at the very front."

"...and what happens if I can't overcome it?"

"You will know if that is the case," Lavenza answered him simply. Just then, the beautiful music ceased, and suddenly, Akira's body grew heavy. His limbs became limp, with he left struggling to try and support his own weight while his eyes closed rapidly, trying to stay awake. Sirens blared, as if signalling a prison break. "It appears that our time is up."

"Time marches on in your world," Igor stated. "We shouldn't keep you here any longer. Until then...farewell."

And with that, Akira's eyes gave way, and he fell back, falling once again into the black abyss of unconsciousness.

TakeYourHeart

When Akira Kurusu awoke, he was greeted by a plain, white ceiling.

Bland, uninteresting, and utterly plain.

"...what a weird dream," he muttered tiredly as he rubbed his eyes, pushing himself up from his bed, removing the comforters. Seriously...what kind of dream was that? Ruin, a prison, fate...none of it made any sense. And those people...how did he dream up

those guys? Well, he shouldn't think too much on it. For now, he should be getting ready. With that in mind, he discarded his lounge-wear, tossing them into the bin, and slipped on his casual clothes; a simple black jacket with a white top and blue jeans. Lastly, he slipped on his glasses. As he did, he heard a knock at the door. "It's open."

The door opened, revealing Sae in her black suit. "Good, you're up," she said with a nod. She then took a look around the room, observing it critically before giving another nod, this one of approval. "Hm...not bad. Could use a bit more work, but otherwise rather tidy." Then, as quickly as the expression formed, she returned to her firm, serious expression. "Alright, come on." He gave a nod, and followed her out the room, closing his door and locking it. As he did so, he caught sight of a girl standing not too far, peeking her head out from the door, having dark brown hair and red eyes. Akira assumed it was Makoto, given the slight resemblance between her and Sae. Makoto seemed to be giving him an analytical look before she returned to her room, closing the door.

'What was that about?' he wondered, but shrugged. Maybe she was just curious about the boy her sister was supposed to look after, or was just giving him the stink-eye. He didn't dwell on it for long, quickly catching up with Sae.

Once he was gone, Makoto opened the door again, stepping out, and looking at the stairwell, where Akira and Sae vanished. "Akira Kurusu," she hummed thoughtfully, folding her arms and tilting her head. "He doesn't look like the kind of person who'd just attack a person without reason. I wonder what happened..." She didn't think on the matter long. She could ask her sister, though it may have been faster to ask the boy himself, although it would have been quite rude to do so. She was worried about Sae, however. By taking in Akira, she was putting more work on herself than necessary, which was saying something since she was always putting put on work. Much expectation was placed on her, since she was in a high position in the Public Prosecutors Office. Makoto wanted to help in some way, though she always wondered how. When she thought about it more...maybe she could help her by keeping an eye on Akira? If he turned to be a problem child, then she could keep an

eye on him at school. Plus, being a student council president had its perks, so maybe...

"...well, I'll suppose I can know what kind of person he is tomorrow."

TakeYourHeart

Akira's first impression of Shujin Academy, in spite of the facility being quite large and up-to-date as one might expect of an elite boarding school, was a prison. The minimalist clock that hung at the front, above the entrance, was an almost taunting way of saying 'its time to serve your sentence,' fences surrounded the entire building, and the gate, from his standpoint, seemed to be the only way in and out. Since it was a sunday, there was no one here except for the faculty members he saw. He wasn't given a tour of the school, instead following Sae straight to the principal's office.

And speaking of the Principal...Akira had never seen such an overweight man in all of his life. The Principal, known as Kobayakawa, was a large man, even by, ahem, fat standards. His brown suit seemed to struggle fitting his rather large form, his belt strained, and the flab of his skin even spilling out over the collar of his shirt. He was completely bald, and his ears seemed to be sinking into his own fatty flesh. Even the chair he sat on seemed to be struggling, holding his weight. Beside him was a woman, likely a teacher, with dark brown unkempt hair and dark brown eyes. Her face looked absolutely ragged, exhausted and tired, with dark rings underneath her eyes. She wore a yellow striped sweater with white and red horizontal lines, a blue denim skirt, white heels, and carried a notebook underneath her arm.

"To reiterate," Kobayakawa said sternly with a narrowed glare aimed directly at him. Akira was unfazed, having been used to seeing such looks before. "Just so we're clear, you will be expelled immediately if you cause any problems. Honestly, I hesitated on accepting someone like you, but there were some circumstances on our side..." His glare hardened. "You may have done a variety of things in hiding in your hometown...but you WILL behave yourself here."

'Typical,' he thought with disinterest. *'No matter where I go, I'm being labelled an outcast, all because I tried to help someone. I*

probably would have had to deal with this kind of treatment too, if I wasn't expelled from my old school.'

"If you are thrown out," Kobayakawa continued. "There will be no place for you to go. Keep that in mind." Akira gave a nod, if only to appease the man, before Kobayakawa gestured his head to the woman next to him. "This is the teacher in charge of your class."

She gave a small bow, and answered in a tired tone that matched her face, "I'm Sadayo Kawakami." She produced something from her pocket, and laid it on the desk. The frizzy-haired teen took it, and gave it a brief look. "That's your student ID. Be sure to read the school rules. Any violations will send you straight to the guidance office. And if, by chance, you have any problems, I won't be able to protect you at all."

She paused, and then looked at Kobayakawa.

"...that IS your promise, Principal Kobayakawa, right?"

'Even the teacher thinks I'm being an inconvenience,' Akira thought, now growing somewhat annoyed with his treatment. Not even a day in Tokyo, and he's being treated like crap. *'Then again, in my new teacher's case, that might be justified...she looks dead to the world.'*

"Indeed," the fat man responded. "He is responsible for his own actions."

Kawakami sighed. "Why does it have to be me, though?" she asked. "There surely would have been better candidates."

"It was a sudden transfer, and your class was the only one that had an opening."

'More like you wanted to dump me on someone as fast you could.' Akira wondered how much longer he would have to listen to this. All they were supposed to do was just explain things, not go into a rant about his placement. Thankfully, Sae saved him as she gave a light glare, her tone showing annoyance. "I hate to be rude, but do you mind if we get going? Unlike you, I'm not given the privilege to enjoy Sundays off."

"Of course, Niijima-san," Kobayakawa nodded, a smile that Akira recognized as the look of someone trying to appease another who was of higher power. Understandable, since she was a prosecutor, though something seemed off about it. He wasn't sure why, but...no, must have been his imagination. He was probably still tired after that weird dream. "It's rather commendable for you to look after someone with a record, especially since you're a prosecutor at your age!"

She didn't even deign to respond to that. "I've already discussed everything regarding the matter, so Kurusu-kun understands his situation."

That seemed to be the end of the conversation, and Kobayakawa, nervous, gave a small nod. Akira had to admit, it was rather amusing to see the man being off-put. Kawakami, on the other hand, sighed before she turned back to him. "Come to the faculty office when you arrive at school tomorrow. I'll show you to your classroom."

He nodded, and then turned to follow Sae out the room. After reaching the entrance, Sae stopped and sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Good grief," she muttered in disapproval. "Even if you have a criminal record, they could show at least some bit of tact in front of a student." She then turned to face him, placing a hand on her hip. "Looks like your past is following you, even here. I've said it before, but don't cause any unnecessary trouble for me, alright?" Akira nodded. He pretty much had that fact drilled into his head at this point. Sae seemed a bit satisfied with his answer, but then shook her head. "Well...come on. Let's go."

With that, they left Shujin Academy. Unknown to Akira, however, a teacher was observing him from one of the classroom, staring at him with a look of contempt.

TO BE CONTINUED...

WARNING! WARNING! THIS NOTE CONTAINS SPOILERS RELATED TO THE END OF THE GAME! IF YOU HAVE NOT REACHED THE DEPTHS OF MEMENTOS, OR THE FINAL DUNGEON, DO NOT READ THIS NOTICE!

A/N: And chapter three is published at last! Took a bit

longer...namely because I was just done with the Velvet Room sequence, only for my computer to wig out on me and delete my progress, so I had to rewrite the whole damn thing.

Anyway, as you can see, Lavenza and Igor are the ones in charge of the Velvet Room. Does this mean Yaldabaoth is out of the story? HELL. NO. I'm simply handling things in a much more different approach. It's my own spin on things, rather than a scrapped idea from Atlus...at least, to my knowledge.

Some fans might be concerned about this, since Yaldabaoth taking over the Velvet Room is very crucial to the end of the game, as well as the events of what happens in the game. However, just because he is not in charge of the Velvet Room, does not mean he won't be a major influence in what is to come. If I removed him from the story, it would take a LOT of think as to how to make the story progress without its primary conductor at the helm. So, if anyone who has finished P5 or knows about Yaldabaoth is worried, don't worry. He is not out of the game. TRUST ME. If at all anything...he'll be in a position you least expect.

I had debated whether or not I should use Lavenza, or have Caroline and Justine at the start, whether as actual assistants rather than two halves of a whole or not was up for debate. Instead, I just went with Lavenza.

Another thing I want to discuss is the Phantom Thieves lineup. EVERYONE is still accounted for. Ryuji, Anne, Morgana, Yusuke, Makoto, Futaba, Haru...no one is being replaced. This also goes for the Confidants.

Well, that's it for now everybody...now, I bid you adieu~

Third Heist: Shujin Academy

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Since time immemorial...they were known as,

"Tricksters."

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

Third Heist: Shujin Academy

"Welcome home, Sis."

Makoto greeted them at the door shortly after they arrived. Akira had closed the door behind him before he took notice of her. Now that she was in full view, he could tell that she at least a year or so older

than him. Her brown hair was in a bob cut with blunt bangs and a braided headband, and her eyes were the same mauve red color as Sae's. She wore a simple black turtleneck over a blue jacket, complete with black leggings and brown boots. She smiled at Sae, who returned the gesture as she greeted Makoto back, hanging her purse before she walked past her, moving towards the kitchen. Given the trouble she had to endure just listening to the principal, she could use a cup of coffee. Meanwhile, Akira and Makoto stared back at one another, red eyes staring back at dark gray ones.

"...nice to meet you," Akira greeted, bowing his head. Since he was going to be living here, he wanted to be as respectful towards Makoto as possible, especially since they would be seeing more of each other. "I'm Akira Kurusu."

Makoto bowed back. "And I'm Makoto, Sae's younger sister," she introduced herself. "And the student council president at Shujin." She paused afterwards, dipping her head, wondering what she should say next. She didn't want to make a bad first impression on him, nor did she want to outright ask him if he was a criminal by choice. "So...um, did you enjoy Shujin? I mean, it's a large school and all, and I'm sure you'll get lost easily as well, but..."

"I didn't get to see much of it," he responded. "We just went in to talk to the Principal, then leave."

"O-oh..."

Well, crap. Scrap that idea. She hoped she could break the ice about speaking about school, though it failed. She bit her lip, trying to think of something else, though Sae returned to the entrance in mild annoyance. "Sorry, Makoto," she apologized to the girl. "Looks like I won't be staying tonight. I just got a call from the Director."

"O-oh, okay," Makoto nodded. She was sad that Sae was leaving, but understood that her job was important. "Will you be home tomorrow?"

"Hopefully," she answered. "Be sure to lock up when you head to bed, okay?" Makoto nodded, and with that, Sae turned, taking her bag and reaching for the door. She stopped, and looked over her

shoulder, giving Akira a warning glare. "I doubt I have to remind you what happens if anything even remotely suspicious happens in the house, right?" she asked. He gave a simple nod. Sae hardly looked convinced by the half-hearted answer, but accepted it nonetheless, and left.

Makoto frowned somewhat in concern. Even if Akira had a bad situation...Sae's words seemed particularly aggrevating. Something about the call she received must have put her in a bad mood or something. "Sorry about that," she told him. "Sis, she...she can get really stressed out about her job. She's been looking after me by herself while juggling with dealing with life as a prosecutor for a long time, so...please don't hold it against her." Akira shook his head. Honestly, he expected as much, given that she obviously took her job seriously enough to be run ragged by it. Plus, it wasn't anything new. Makoto seemed to be relieved by his answer, and smiled somewhat. "You know...sis told me a bit about you. You're on probation because you got involved in a physical altercation with some man, right?" There was a noticable, pregnant pause, as she seemed to ponder her words carefully. "If it's okay with you...how did you-?"

She didn't get far, unfortunately, as a loud ringing emanated from her pocket, no doubt her cell phone.

"Who's calling me?" she wondered before she dug into her pocket, pulling out her cell phone and putting it to her ear. "Hello, Niijima speaking...oh, Tatsuki-kun. Yes, the paperwork has been filled out, don't worry. I know, I know, sorry, but those papers have to be filled out by tomorrow. Yes, I'm aware. Alright." The call then ended there, and she slipped her phone back into her pocket and looked back at the frizzy-haired teen she would be living with. "Sorry, that was a member of the student council. Your sudden transfer caused a bit of problems for us, and now the principal's swamped us with work."

Akira sighed, scratching the back of his head. While at first it seemed like Makoto stated something the people in his life so far would say...there was innocence in those words. She didn't know the double meaning behind them, and thus didn't actually mean it. Of course, even if she didn't, the phrasing certainly left little to his already pessimistic and troubled mind. "It's fine," he told her.

"So...what did you want to ask?"

Makoto opened her mouth to speak, but then stopped, thinking for a moment, and shaking her head. Now was probably not the right time to ask. She was thinking a bit too hastily. She would ask him about his circumstances, but for now, she would simply try and get a better feel about him. So far, he was as quiet as he looked. Still, there was a lot more to ask about. "Nothing," she told him. "Out of curiosity, though...do you have any experience cooking? If so, what's your preference?"

TakeYourTime

Kawakami was absolutely ragged. It wasn't surprising for some, really, since even on the first day she began teaching here at Shujin, she looked so tired she could fall asleep any second. Her night-job activities were the primary reason behind it, but another factor was that her students, at least the majority a major handful at times. And now, much to her dismay, the principal had dumped a new student in her class - a delinquent of all things! "Why did he have to be in my class?" she solemnly complained to herself. It was rather rude to think of him that way, especially since she knew nothing about this boy other than that he attacked a man without reason. One might blame it on her fatigue, but the fact remained that Akira Kurusu, in the meantime, was being an inconvenience to her. "A male teacher would have been more suited to this..."

"You alright there, Kawakami-sensei?" The woman looked up, and immediately felt disgust, making sure it didn't show on her face. It was a man, easily taller than herself at least by a head, with a strong body, broad with muscle, wearing baggy blue sweats and a gym shirt, a whistle hanging around his neck. Facewise, he looked slightly handsome, his chin wide, and his hair a curly mess. It was Suguru Kamoshida, the PE teacher. "You seem ready to fall asleep any second."

"It's nothing," she answered him. Truth be told, however, she wanted nothing to do with the man. And for good reason. "Just having to deal with a troublesome situation."

"You mean about that transfer student?" he asked, folding his arms.

A look of disapproval formed across his face as he shook his head. "Why in the world was someone like that admitted here? Kobayakawa-san wants Shujin Academy to be successful, right? So why take in a kid who has a criminal record?"He gave a sigh as his arms return to his sides. "I thought my volleyball team contributed well enough."

Kawakami wanted to tell him off, but kept her mouth shut. Instead, she swallowed her poison, and replied in her same tired tone, "That's certainly true." There was a bitter aftertaste in her mouth after having said that. She did not enjoy being around Kamoshida for any reason, especially since, in spite of the attitude he was showing her right now, he was anything but the teacher others imagined. If she were to make a comparison...

Akira Kurusu, a teen with a criminal record, was a saint compared to a man like Suguru Kamoshida.

TakeYourTime

The news was buzzing with activity. It was already evening, yet the chaotic life of Tokyo was showing itself as the news reported a subway train accident. According to the official reports, the driver had suffered some sort of psychotic breakdown, completely unresponsive when passengers told him to slow down as the train was gaining too much speed. In Sae's perspective, it was only reinforcing her belief that these seemingly random incidents were anything but. From the reports of her own private investigation, unknown to anyone including her boss, these mental shutdowns and psychotic breakdowns began over two years ago. While she was still digging into it, she was making theories as she went. Of course, there was no definitive proof if they were connected, it was simply what her instincts were telling her. And she listened to them. After all, in this world, you had to use every resource and every ability available to you to get ahead. There was absolutely no room for error here.

"It's less of an operating accident," the Director of the SIU remarked with slight distaste. He was an elderly man, already balding with what little grays he had swept behind the ear, and dressed in a fine blue suit with rectangular glasses sitting atop the bridge of his nose.

"And more of a crime by the company and the government. Sight inspectors apparently reported all of this six months ago. The deterioration of the tracks and the ATC. Seems a railway company and the minister of transport both turned a blind eye to the truth. There's no way they can hide...this will go all the way to the top."

As the news continued to report about the incident, even remarking about the various other reports, Sae felt there was something more. Something that she was missing. There was no way this was just a mistake or a cover up. After all...so many changes in people's behavior is irregular.

"Everything's linked," the SIU Director said, earning her attention and reading her thoughts. "That's what you're thinking, correct?" She didn't answer, simply looking at the screen. He gave a sheepish smile, and chuckled. "Oh well," he then looked up at her, lowering his arms. "Are you free? You and I haven't gone out for a drink in a while."

Sae turned to her boss, offering a smile. While some days he could be quite harsh and unforgiving, it was expected of a man of his position. A position he earned through blood, sweat and tears, and through the same means she did to this point - going in without hesitation, using every resource available, and never faltering for even a second. "Thank you, sir," she said gratefully. "But I have another meeting to attend."

"Understandable," he said, nodding. "Oh, by the way...how is that boy you're looking after? What was his name again? Kurusu, Akira?"

She nodded. "He's behaving himself for the time being," she answered. "And he starts attending Shujin Academy tomorrow."

"Shujin, eh?" the Director chuckled. "If I recall, your younger sister goes there as well, doesn't she? Heh, sounds like he'll be under watch from both a prosecutor and a student council president. Then again, I suppose that's what happens to youngsters these days who waste away their youth."

Sae didn't wish to respond to that one, and instead bowed her head before she took her leave. She exited the office, and began making

her way to the entrance. As she did, she thought back to Akira's circumstances. *'He's a criminal who wasted away his youth, there's no doubting that,'* she thought with slight apprehension. *'But that was only because he meddled in affairs he wasn't supposed to. Still, though...the fact that the man was familiar with the police enough that he asked them to not reveal his name in the papers...'* She didn't want to dig too deep into it, but something about that fact didn't sit right with her. Just who did Akira injure that he could have that sort of influence? Oh well...not like it mattered. Besides, it was hardly any of her business. She had two jobs right now - making sure he didn't do anything stupid, and finding out the truth behind her current case. She reached the staircase leading down the entrance, and to her slight dismay, she found a familiar sight waiting for her at the foot of the staircase.

It was a young man, probably at the age of 17, shaggy chin-length brown hair with bangs and reddish-brown eyes. He wore a beige, striped black and white tie, black buttons, black trousers, and black gloves. In one hand was a familiar steel case with an A mark, followed by a dot, and in the other hand, a cell phone. It was Goro Akechi, the famed "Charismatic Detective." While she didn't want to, she had little choice in the matter but to ask for his help, especially since the Director had already made the arrangement. While she didn't like him in some ways, she did find his deductions and theories to be rather interesting, as they provided a look into things one would normally not consider.

Once she reached the second flight, he noticed her and smiled, slipping his phone into his pants pocket. "Did you request for me?" he asked, though the smile practically told her he was going to enjoy this. She would have rolled her eyes, but didn't want to give the brat the satisfaction of annoying her. Then again, she could also see his slowly building interest in what he was about to investigate. "Is it a case?"

"Not quite," she responded, walking past him briskly. "I wanted your opinion on something."

Akechi gave a shrug, turning to follow her. "Sure," he accepted. "Though often, you're judgement is correct, though." There was a certain eagerness in his voice, getting a bit too close to her. "Can we

discuss this over sushi, perhaps? You are making a student work late, after all~"

'For a detective,' she released a sigh in her mind. *'You are questionable...'*

"Conveyor belt only," Sae told him without even looking. She gave a small smirk, however, when he whined in disappointment, but otherwise followed her out the building. While sushi certainly sounded lovely, it was a bit unethical to be having dinner with a minor, detective or no. Plus, she wasn't quite into younger men. Also...she found it to be slightly amusing to dash Akechi's hopes, though she still felt slightly uneasy. Just what was making her so cautious around him? He wasn't a danger to anyone; hell, if anything, he was like a saint. Solving crimes, a media sensation...he was hardly as stuck-up as the rest of the men in her life...the ones at the office, to be exact.

Well, she could put that aside for now. After all, there was a case to be solved.

TakeYourTime

The morning had arrived fairly quickly. However, Monday mornings were the bane of Akira's existence, as he was quite sluggish on the first day of the school week. Makoto had knocked on the door to inform him that breakfast was ready, which also served to be his wakeup call, much to his chagrin. Regardless, he changed into his school uniform. He had to admit, the attire was, in his opinion, somewhat reminiscent to what he'd imagine prison clothes to look like. He wore the uniform in the expected manner, albeit modified to his own tastes. Rather than a turtleneck sweater that was provided as an alternative, he wore a dress shirt with a black and red striped tie hanging loosely around his neck, and the black blazer left open. The Shujin Academy crest was branded on the breast pocket on the left side, and his school bag hanging above his shoulder, packed with everything he needed for the day.

After eating a rather somewhat tense and silent breakfast with Makoto, who had stolen a few glances at him every now and then, she escorted him to the train station leading to Aoyama-Itchome,

where Shujin Academy was located. The ride was equally as silent and tense, though the chatter in the train car had provided some entertainment. Akira enjoyed the idle chatter of the people around him, as it reminded him of the chatter he heard everyday back home. Not only that, but idle chatter tended to provide some interesting information, like the occurrences around town and such. Here in the packed train, he overheard store discounts, men complaining about their jobs, women sharing gossip, and so on.

Eventually, they reached their stop. Makoto and he had a bit of trouble when they exited the train, due to the packed nature of the crowd pouring out. "E-excuse me, sorry!" she apologized as they made their way to the exit. "Pardon us!" They managed to break free from the crowd, and reached the staircase leading up. Once they left the subway, Makoto let out a sigh, dusting herself off. "Good grief...I suppose Monday mornings are rather hectic," she remarked before she looked at Akira. "Well then...today is your first day at Shujin Academy. I suppose the teachers have already told you this, but causing trouble is a surefire way to get you kicked out fast, so be on your best behavior." Akira gave a nod, already familiar with this new routine of his. He was a bit happy, though, as Makoto wasn't talking to him like he was a problem, but rather out of actual concern. Perhaps she simply thought of him as another student she needed to look after, what with being the student council president and all. "Alright. Let's get going." She gave a small grin. "I should be able to give you a proper tour before school starts, too."

Afterwards, she led him into the busy streets of Aoyama, and eventually came into the narrow path leading to Shujin. A steady flow of students was seen entering the school, all dressed in uniform. Many were also wearing the turtlenecks that Akira had forgone in exchange for his dress shirt. "Alright, alright, get to your class!" a teacher at the front gate barked. He was rather portly, but remained more in shape unlike the Principal. He had a serious and stern expression, aged with wrinkles and large glasses, his black hair styled professionally and mixed with gray, and dressed like a stereotypical hardcore instructor he had seen in movies. A white shirt, red tie, suspenders, dark trousers, that sort of look. "No dilly-dallying!" The man's eyes was glaring at each student like a hawk, arms folded and looking for any sort of problem before he found

Akira and Makoto, who reached the gate. His gaze softened a bit, but remained stone-faced. "Ah, Niijima. Good to see you."

"You as well, Ushimaru-sensei," she greeted respectfully with a bow before she turned to Akira. "This is Ushimaru, our social studies teacher."

The man gave a grunt, studying Akira intensely before speaking in a gruff manner, "You the transfer student?" Akira nodded, trying to be as respectful as possible. He noticed a few people staring at him as they passed the three, speaking in hushed whispers. Great...the rumors were already starting to spread. Already in trouble with the teachers, he assumed. Regardless, he focused his attention on Ushimaru, lest he suffer the consequences. "I don't know what sort of place you come from, but here at Shujin, we expect only the best behavior from you. You screw up, and you're out of here. Understand that?"

"...yes, sir."

"Good," he nodded in approval. "Now, hurry up and get to class." Makoto and Akira gave another bow, and turned to enter the school. As they did, they heard Ushimaru yell. "Sakamoto! How many times have I told you?! Get rid of that dye!"

"Yeah yeah, whatever!" a vulgar shout came in response. "I'll get to it when I get to it!"

"...that was when everything first started for me," Akira said, opening his eyes and looking at Sae straight in the eye. "When I first met Ryuji and Ann...and Kamoshida. That was the day when everything started."

Sae nodded, leaning back a bit. "I suppose it was," she agreed. "Especially considering who Kamoshida was." She paused for a moment, then bit her lip, as if struggling to ask him something that seemed out of the ordinary. Akira wondered what was on her mind, but knew what. Her mind was just a whirlwind of thoughts just from being in this room with him, the boy she was supposed to look after,

but ended up caring for. Eventually, she spoke up again. "There was a terrible subway accident that day as well...do you remember?" Her tone had shifted. She was struggling with her emotions, so she fell back to her only resort - the facet of a stone-faced prosecutor. "It was the uproar that the public had called the *Psychotic Breakdown Incidents.* "

"I knew a little about it," he answered. "People would either fall unconscious, or go nuts without reason. The engineer of a train suddenly blacked out, and the train gained speed, eventually crashing. No one died...but a lot of people were hurt as a result."

Sae nodded. "That's correct. It would be hard not to know about it, since it was all over your school. In fact..." She paused again, this time struggling with her emotions. She shook her head, and pushed her folder in front of him, twisting it around and opening it up, revealing a report with a photograph attached - a man with a slightly attractive face, curly hair, and a broad chin with wide muscles. "One of the victims was your teacher...the first target of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts."

Akira looked at the picture, and thought back to the events. Now that he thought about it...him going to Shujin wasn't how it all started for him, was it? No...it had to be then. That moment, when he...

"Akira-kun," Sae spoke up, staring at him with intensity. "Back then...were you still just an "ordinary" student?"

TO BE CONTINUED

Fourth Heist: Distortions

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Since time immemorial...they were known as,

"Tricksters."

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

Fourth Heist: Distortions

"...and this is the faculty room," Makoto finished their tour, standing outside the door where Kawakami was waiting. The tour in itself was hardly anything special, and while she had shown him the facilities, Akira wasn't quite impressed. Even though the equipment and areas were definitely up to par with an elite school like Shujin, it was hardly

any different from his old school. "So, any questions so far?"

He shook his head. There was nothing he needed to know. And if he did, he could just ask her later when they had the time.

"Alright then," she said, turning to leave. "I need to head to the Student Council room. You'll find me there if you need anything." She took six steps before she stopped and turned back to face him, smiling somewhat. "Oh, and Kurusu-kun? Welcome to Shujin Academy." With that, she left, walking away and heading up the staircase. Akira's stare lingered for a bit, a bit surprised. It seemed that Makoto hadn't fully pegged him for a trouble child like everyone else. She didn't hold a high opinion of him, but she hadn't joined the bandwagon of considering him to be troublesome.

Regardless, he grabbed hold of the small slit in the door, and gently pulled it open, stepping inside the faculty room. As he expected, several desks were found alongside many men and women, either at their desk, writing on documents or grading papers and the like. At the closest one to the door, he found Kawakami, writing on what appeared to be a document of some sort. She didn't notice him at first when he walked him, but upon hearing his footsteps approaching her, she turned. "Oh," she said, looking slightly surprised. "You're...earlier than I expected."

Akira shrugged. "Woke up early, didn't have much of a choice."

"I...see," the teacher sweatdropped slightly at his nonchalant response before she stood up. "Well, class is going to start in a few minutes, so I suppose that's enough for the time being." She turned to her desk, gathering her papers and stuffing them into the clipboard. She placed it underneath her arm, and then looked at Akira. "Well then." He nodded, and followed her out the faculty room. Shortly afterwards, they entered back into the main hallway, and began making their way towards his classroom. "I'm sure you've been told this numerous times already, but..."

'I know, I know,' he thought in annoyance. *'Cause any trouble, I get kicked out. Why does everyone keep reminding me so much?'* They turned the corner, and passed by two female students. As he walked past them, he gave a brief look over his shoulder, noticing that they

stopped after he passed them, giving him a slight stare before whispering to one another. *'Rumors again, I see...so, what will be it here? Kid got chewed out by teacher at the front gate? Delinquent getting in trouble on his first day? ...knowing my luck, the students here already know about my record.'* Even if the faculty was asked to keep quiet, there was no way such information could be withheld for long. Rumors had a way of getting into the mouths and ears of others, after all, one way or another. Soon, they reached his classroom. Kawakami opened the door, and they stepped inside, with the teacher taking her place at the podium, and he at the chalkboard, already writing his name.

"Alright, settle down everyone," Kawakami called out tiredly. The chattering of the students had ceased, quieting down to where only hushed whispers could be heard in the background. "Class is now in session. First, I'd like to introduce a new student." Akira set the chalk on the small metal railing underneath the chalkboard, and turned to the students. "This is Akira Kurusu. He will be joining our class as of today," she introduced him before giving him a small look. "Kurusu-kun, do you have anything to say to the class?"

'Yeah, a few. Like how I'm innocent and got in trouble for helping a woman from a drunk only for the police to take his side,' Akira thought sarcastically before speaking. "I'm Akira Kurusu...pleased to meet all of you."

After the introduction, he strained his ears, hearing the new whispers that started to go around.

"Man, that's him? He looks...well, normal."

"I thought he was gonna be a thug, but he just looks like your average joe."

"I bet that's just how he normally is, but once you piss him off..."

'Yep, everyone knows about my record,' Akira thought in annoyance. He wanted to tell these people off, but the rules were clear. It was frustrating, being forced to play to a tune he didn't want to play. However, it was necessary if he wanted a regular life, or at least what could pass as a semblance of one. Kawakami had told

him that he could take a seat behind the girl near the windows. Sighing, he nodded, and walked down the isle, uncaring of the gazes of everyone around him. As he passed the girl he would be sitting behind, he stole a look, and was genuinely surprised.

The girl looked slightly foreign, if only because of her eyes and hair. She had bright blue eyes and ash blonde wavy hair styled in bushy pigtails, with parted side bangs on the right side of her face. She accessorized with a single yellow hair clip above her left ear, as well as small circular earrings on both ears. She wore the school uniform, but also modified like his for her own preference; the standard black blazer over a white varsity-like hoodie worn long to cover most of her short plaid skirt. Her hoodie had a zipper, a red stripe between two blue stripes at the bottom, an S symbol near the front bottom on one side, and a green four-leaf-clover symbol on the back of the hood. She also wore red tights and brown boots with yellow laces.

His gaze didn't last longer than a second before he took his seat. With that done, he pulled out his books, and Kawakami began her lecture.

TakeYourHeart

"That will be all for today," Kawakami announced, signalling the end of class, as well as the school day. "Normal classes will resume tomorrow."

Everyone was soon buzzing, leaving their desks and the classroom, while only some lingered about, speaking with friends. Akira, for his part, felt tired. *'I forgotten how exhausting school can be,'* he thought as he held a hand over his mouth as he yawned before he packed his things, slinging his bag over his shoulder. *'Time to head home, I guess. I've memorized the route already, so...oh. Wait, I don't have Makoto-san's phone number, so I can't text her that I already know the route home.'* He gave a sigh, and scratched his scalp. Great...now he had to make a detour. "Gimme a break," he muttered before he left the classroom. As he did, he again noticed the stares, but paid them no mind. It would be no different from the stares he received back home after the incident. Besides, he was pretty sure everything would blow over soon...if he got lucky, that is. After all,

gossip queens tend to speak frequently.

While looking for the student council room, he had to ask a fellow student where the room was located. He also took notice of the boy's appearance. He was roughly beat up, with bruises all over his face, marred with bandages, and a forlorn look. He didn't wear the jacket, but did had on the turtleneck sweater with the sleeves rolled up, and had a messy bed of dark blue hair. Akira noted that he was nervous speaking with him, though he understood why, since everyone seemed to be aware of his reputation. The room was up on the third floor, right next to the library, so it wasn't hard to miss. He thanked the boy, and went on his way up. After reaching the third floor, he noticed that quite a few of the students upon this floor looked younger than him, though recalling Makoto's tour, this was because the students were divided into three different years, and each year occupied a different floor; third years on the first floor, second years had the second, and first years on the third. To his luck, Makoto was standing right outside, speaking with another student.

"I heard you came to school with that criminal," the student said, wearing a green armband with his uniform, and a concerned face. "He didn't blackmail you into coming with him, did he?"

Makoto frowned, crossing her arms. "No, he didn't do anything like that," she said with annoyance. "More importantly, where did you hear about that? Only the school faculty is supposed to know about Kurusu-kun's record."

"W-well, everyone's talking about it," the armband-wearing student replied, slightly nervous from the glare. Akira didn't blame him. That stare looked pretty intense. "Plus, it's on the school website."

Akira and Makoto's eyes widened upon this piece of information. His info was on a public website for anyone to see? What the hell?! Having the school know he had a record was one thing, but anyone could see that! For once, Akira was left shaken. Who in the hell leaked that info? It had to be someone with access to the website domain, so it must have been a teacher...but why?! "What?" Makoto gaped. "Wh-who did it?"

"I don't know," the student replied, shaking his head. "L-look, just be careful, okay Niijima-senpai? I've heard some nasty rumors about that guy."

Makoto was silent as the student walked away, bidding her farewell. Her face was troubled, and he couldn't quite blame her. Going by what the student just said...it seemed like his record was hardly the only thing that was being spread around. Akira didn't want to know what kind of rumors were going around, as he was more concerned about the fact that someone had more or less spread his record to anyone who looked at Shujin's website. He gave yet another sigh. Somehow, he knew this was going to be a recurring theme for him. Oh well...he supposed he would have to find out about this later. He approached Makoto, alerting her of his presence. "O-oh, Kurusu-kun," she said, surprised a bit before she looked at him with sadness. "So...I suppose you've already heard?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "Expected as much, actually. Someone's bound to find out eventually."

"I suppose," Makoto said, biting her lip. "But it still doesn't make it right." She tapped her forehead, wondering what she could do. As student council president, it was her job to make sure she tended to the student body, which was right now in an uproar due to Akira having a criminal record; a fact that was supposed to remain with the faculty as to not alarm them. Now, however, it was in plain sight, and already, rumors were spreading like wildfire. However, she was also worried about Akira. Now that his past was in full view, he was practically void of any chance of having a second chance to start a new life. She wanted to help him, but couldn't think of any way. It was at times like these that she wished she knew what to do when her authority as student council president literally meant nothing in this situation.

She gave a tired groan, shaking her head ruefully. She couldn't think like this. She needed to be positive. "Anyway," she returned her attention to Akira, putting a hand at her hip. "Hopefully it blows over. Thankfully, because this is the start of the first term, there's no work for me, so we can go home. By the way, Sis texted me earlier. She said she won't be home again tonight."

"Is she not home often?"

Makoto sighed. "Downside to being a prosecutor is that your boss runs you ragged," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "Or so Sis says." She then brightened her face, and smiled at him. "Anyway, shall we go?"

"...sure."

With a nod, the two left, heading down the stairs. As they did, some of the first year students who noticed them being together whispered amongst themselves.

"Dude, you seeing that?"

"That was the Student Council President, yeah? Who was that she was with?"

"Maybe its that delinquent transfer student everyone's been talking about."

"What's she doin' with him? Think he's already causing trouble?"

"They looked pretty close. Do they know each other or something?"

And the talking spread even to the second-years when they saw them briefly, though the two payed them little mind. As they walked down the stairs, Akira had pulled out his phone, checking to see if he had any new messages. Much to his surprise, however, he found an increasingly disturbing sight on his phone.

It was the app from before. The one with the eye.

'What the hell is going on here?' he thought, his irritation growing. *'I've deleted this damn thing twice now.'*

Just as he tapped it, with the intent to once again delete it before something bad happened to his phone, they reached the first floor, and to his confusion, was stopped by Makoto, noticing something ahead of them at the entrance. "Takamaki-san," she muttered in slight surprise. Akira followed her gaze, and noticed the blonde girl who sat in front of him in class. She looked to be speaking with a

teacher; probably the PE teacher by the look of his attire, as he wore a jersey with a whistle around his neck, and was rather muscular. He looked back at Makoto, and noticed a look of slight animosity directed at the teacher. "Kamoshida-sensei..."

'Kamoshida?'

"I hope everything's been going okay for you, Ann-chan," the man, Kamoshida, said in a leisurely tone, coupled with a concerned smile as he spoke with the girl called Takamaki. "You seemed pretty out of it when I picked you up at the station earlier. Everything going okay at your part-time job?"

Takamaki nodded slowly. "Y-yeah," she answered, appearing to be rather anxious. If the look on her face was any indication, she clearly did not want to be anywhere near the man, though Akira was unsure why. Perhaps he was notorious among the students? "I'm just...not feeling well today."

"Well, don't push yourself too hard, okay?" Kamoshida told her, placing a hand on her shoulder. Takamaki, for the briefest second, flinched under his touch. "If you want, I can give you a ride home too."

"T-that's fine," Takamaki told him, gently pushing herself out of his grasp. Kamoshida seemed taken aback by this action while the girl looked increasingly more uncomfortable. "A-anyway, I need to get going. I have a shoot today." She performed a deep bow. "Excuse me." Faster than what Akira was expecting, the girl speed-walked away from the man, reaching the doors in seconds and leaving Kamoshida behind.

The teacher stared at the door, his expression unreadable before he left. Akira frowned. Whoever the man was...something definitely seemed off. Going by Makoto's hostility and Takamaki's reaction to him...he was either not probably liked, or there was something about him that neither girls liked. He even noticed something rather disturbing as well. The man seemed to be overly familiar with her, speaking to her on a first-name basis, and the way he grabbed her shoulder was...how should he put it? If he didn't know any better, it seemed like he-

"Fucking perverted bastard."

Akira blinked, and turned his head. There was another student next to him, leaning against the wall and watching the whole thing happen with a sour look on his face. It was a boy his age with short spiky blonde hair, though his eyebrows were black indicating that he had dyed it, and dark brown eyes. He wore the uniform, but like Akira himself and Takamaki, it was modified. It consisted of the standard black blazer, unbuttoned to reveal a yellow t-shirt with a comic style star symbol and the word 'ZOMG!' His plaid trousers were rolled up to reveal his ankles, and the suspenders hanged down instead of being worn on his shoulders. He also wore a white belt with white sneakers that had a rising sun flag motif.

"Perverted...bastard?" Akira unknowingly repeated. When he registered, his eyes widened, and earned the boy's attention, who looked at him and glared. Oh great...this should be fun. Going by what he saw by his attire, the boy was probably a delinquent, or at the very least one of the school's more...unsociable students.

"What?" the boy growled, removing himself from the wall and taking a step forward. "You gonna rat me out to that asshole?"

Before the blonde could do anything, though, Makoto stepped in between, a stern expression on her face. "Enough, Sakamoto-kun."

"P-Prez?!" The blonde, Sakamoto Makoto called him, backed off immediately, stepping back. "W-what're you doin' here?"

"I was on my way home, like everyone else," she answered curtly, crossing her arms. "I would have expected you to do the same. Moreover, its quite rude to refer to a teacher in such a manner," There was a brief pause in her voice before she quietly murmured under her breath. "Even if it is someone like Kamoshida-sensei..."

Sakamoto scoffed. "Yeah, right," he said in disdain, kicking the floor. "The bastard's a sicko, and you know it." He then looked at Akira, who remained quiet throughout the conversation. "Hey, what do you think?"

He tilted his head. "What about?"

"What about?" the blonde male quirked an eyebrow. "About Kamoshida! He thinks of the whole school like its his own damn castle!"

Makoto's eyes narrowed. "Sakamoto-kun..." she warned dangerously. While she did indeed share his opinion of Kamoshida, having more than heard enough of the hushed and terrified whispers amongst the student body, and even a few teachers within the faculty, it was rather dangerous to be making accusations out in public. "I believe that's enough."

"I'm just sayin' the truth is all," Sakamoto replied with disinterest, much to her anger. How the hell could he not take this any more seriously?! He was already on bad terms with the teachers, and was constantly being on the edge of suspension! If he pushed his luck, he could be expelled for goodness sake! And as Student Council President, she couldn't let that slide! That, and it irked her how he had yet to rid himself of that blonde hair dye. Sakamoto then looked back at Akira, and after an actual look, he quirked an eyebrow. "Wait...I don't think I've seen you before. You a new student?"

"This is Kurusu-kun," the red-eyed girl introduced him, struggling to keep herself from lashing out. "He started attending here today."

"Oh. That explains why you don't know him," Sakamoto said, crossing his arms. "Word of advice? Keep away from that fucker. He's nothing but trouble."

"How much longer are you going to keep this up?" Makoto asked, her irritation beginning to leak. "Look, I realize you and Kamoshida-sensei are not exactly friendly with one another, especially with what happened on the track team, but if you keep this up, you're going to be expelled!" Sakamoto rolled his eyes, which proved to be the last straw. She gritted her teeth, and her hands balled into fists. Thankfully, she managed to keep some control as she refrained from yelling too loudly to create attention. "Just what is up with you?!"

The delinquent scowled. "What's up with me?" he questioned, getting in Makoto's face. "What's up with you? You're the Prez here, and yet you just let everyone walk all over you like some pushover!"

"W-what?!" she gawked at the slander. "Th-that's not true in the least!" She realized she was allowing Sakamoto to get to her, and shook her head. "A-anyway, that's hardly the point! Sakamoto-kun, if you don't clean up your act-"

'I should probably stop them,' Akira thought, noticing the rising tension. Normally, someone in his position, at least at this very moment, would just walk away before the bomb went off and he was dragged into it, but he wasn't like someone else. He wasn't the type to stand idly by while someone was about to get into a brawl with another. "I think that's enough," he said, putting a hand on Makoto's shoulder. She jumped a bit, having completely forgotten about him in the heat of her argument with Sakamoto, and looked at him in surprise. Akira gave a small look, which more or less showed concern for her before looking at Sakamoto. "Look, I don't get what's going on here, but..."

"What's going on here?" Sakamoto repeated with anger. "Oh, I'll tell you what's going on!"

Unknown to the three, the mysterious app on Akira's phone remained active, as his touch had opened it up, creating a menu belonging to some kind of voice activation property. And it recorded Sakamoto's words.

"That fucking perverted asshole, Suguru Kamoshida, thinks of Shujin Academy as his own goddamn castle, like he's some kind of goddamn king!"

[Suguru Kamoshida...Shujin Academy...Castle...]

The unmistakeable, electronic female voice that called out from Akira's phone after the rather tense and uneasy silence following Sakamoto's shout had surprised the three. Akira looked down, and found the app he tried to delete previously now open, menu included. Makoto also noticed the app, and saw the icon, looking quite disturbed. "W-what in the..."

[Match Found. Target: Asmodaeus. Beginning Navigation.]

"H-hey," Sakamoto said, confused and at the same time, disturbed.

"The hell is-" he was cut off when he suddenly cringed, groaning in pain as he held his head. "Ngh...!"

Akira and Makoto both followed suit, gripping their temples. A sense of pain and light-headedness overcame them, and their senses, for a moment, became distorted. Unknown to any of them, the entrance of Shujin Academy, or rather the world around them, began to turn dark purple. Red ripples began to flow, as if the surroundings were nothing but water. The world shimmered, twisting and warping with each ripple. However, soon, as the sense of pain in their heads faded, the world began to settle. "D-dammit," Sakamoto growled, shaking his head. "The effin' hell was..." he trailed off as his eyes suddenly turned to the size of saucers. "...what the hell is this?"

"W-what?" Makoto maoned, still slightly left uneasy after that bout of nausea. "What's wrong?" Akira recovered soon after, and shared Makoto's sentiments...until both saw what Sakamoto saw. They were both caught off guard. "W-what in the world is this?!"

They were no longer in Shujin's entrace, right near the main gate. In fact, they weren't even inside Shujin at all. Instead, they were inside what could only be described as some sort of ballroom belonging inside some sort of lavish castle. It was a mix of purple, gold and red, with a grand staircase right next to them, leading up to what looked to be a grand portrait of a man locked in battle, adorned in brilliant golden armor, sword in hand. However, for some disturbing reason, the face of the warrior great resembled that of Kamoshida, the teacher that was speaking with Takamaki, and the subject of their conversation earlier. Above, grand chandeliers hanged from the ceiling, gently swaying.

'What in the heck...is this?' Akira questioned, completely thrown-off guard. What in the world was this place? Moreover...how in the heck did they get here? Weren't they at Shujin just moments ago? Also...what was with this atmosphere? It felt so heavy and oppressive, almost like something was weighing down on him. Not only that, but...something about this place felt...wrong. It felt like the Velvet Room's atmosphere, though that calming and soothing nature was nowhere to be found. No, it felt so...malevolent, like danger was so horribly close to him. Honestly, it was hard to breathe. *'How did we...'* He looked down at his phone, and noticed

that the entire screen was covered by the app, though it seemed to be glitching around some parts. *'Did...the app bring us here? Now that I think about it...it said something about finding a match.'*

"H-hey," Sakamoto looked at the two, as if expecting them to have answer. "The heck is this place? Weren't we at Shujin?"

Makoto nodded, quite shaken. This defied all sense of logic...how was any of this possible? "W-we were, but..." she shook her head. "I-i don't know...how is any of this possible?"

"How should I know?" Sakamoto shot back before looking around. "Man...is this, like, the inside of a castle or something?" Akira gave a shrug, though he had to admit, the architecture was incredible. Whoever built this place put a lot of detail. The blonde male then saw the portrait, and grew disturbed. "Is that...Kamoshida? Tch, whoever painted that oughta be punched in the face." He scowled, clearly not liking the painting. "Just looking at that stupid mug is pissin' me off."

"Never mind that," Makoto said, urgency in her voice. "L-let's get out of here. I don't know why, but...something about this place...it doesn't feel right."

"Got that right," Sakamoto nodded in agreement. "Place gives me the creeps..."

Akira gave a nod as well, growing increasingly more uncomfortable. The three then began moving away from the staircase, taking one of the nearest doors, and thus, unknowingly, leading them further inside the castle, all the while completely unaware of the golden, yellow eyes that watched them leave, a cold and malicious intent behind them.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Fifth Heist: Mask of Rebellion

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Since time immemorial...they were known as,

"Tricksters."

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

Fifth Heist: Mask of Rebellion

"I think we took a wrong turn," Sakamoto said, growing visibly disturbed as they looked at the scenery in front of them. Makoto and Akira looked on, sharing such sentiments. They were looking for an exit, but what was in front of him was anything but. It was, in simple words, a dungeon. Cobblestone and steel and wood made up the

entire area, and water rushed through like a heavy stream. Quite honestly, it was an unnerving sight to be sure. Even more disturbing was the fact that there were cages hanging down, and though they were unoccupied...it left hardly anything to the imagination. "Okay, seriously, the hell is this place?"

Makoto and Akira didn't answer. There was no way either of them could. There were hardly any answers they had. Instead, all they could do was move forward, all the while trying to ignore the scenery around them. As they moved, Akira checked his phone. *'The app must have brought us here somehow,'* he thought, staring at the unusual screen that was on his phone. The eye stared back at him creepily, still maintaining that bizarre form. He had tried to exit out of it earlier, but nothing worked. He even tried using the photo app just to see if any feature on his phone at all...but there was nothing. *'But...how? Moreover, why does it keep installing on my phone?'* He had never heard of such an aggressive app before, much less one that could cause something like this. For now, though, he would concentrate on finding a way out of here.

"None of this makes any damn sense," Sakamoto growled in frustration as they walked, scratching his head furiously. "How the hell do you go from being at school to a castle?!" He turned back to Akira and Makoto, taking a moment to pause. "Hey...you guys have any idea what this place is?"

"It's a castle," Akira answered plainly.

"Well duh!" the blonde rolled his eyes. "I get that, but...shit man, there's no way this is just possible." He sighed, shaking his head furiously. "And the heck was up with that portrait? That was totally Kamoshida!"

"There's no doubt about that," Makoto nodded, holding her elbow as she dipped her head in thought. She was taking a moment to think about the details so far. Perhaps there was some sort of clue that would let them gain more insight about the situation. "Now that I think about it...we ended up here after we saw Kamoshida-sensei talking with Takamaki-san." She pondered a bit further, and then remembered another important detail. She turned to Akira, her gaze centered on her phone. "And...something about beginning a

navigation. Akira, were you running a search app?"

He shook his head, and showed the phone to the two. They looked a bit surprised and perhaps a bit creeped out by the fact that his phone was overcome with a black and red eye. "Its been like this since we got here," he told them. "I've tried deleting it twice now, but it keeps popping back up."

"W-wait, seriously?" Sakamoto leaned on his leg as he crossed his arms. "It keeps showing up?" He took another look at Akira's phone screen, and shuddered a bit. "Yeesh...talk about creepy."

"Strange, though," Makoto frowned. "I've never heard of an app that keeps installing after you've deleted it. Moreover, suppose this app is the reason why we're here...how is any of this possible? It's physically impossible to be transported from one location to another." She sighed, palming her forehead before she turned to look at the two. "Anyway, let's find a way out of here. The sooner, the better."

"Got that right," Sakamoto nodded. "Alright, let's...get..." he trailed off as he looked past the two, and suddenly, his face went a bit pale. "Uh...guys...?"

Makoto and Akira looked over their shoulder, and immediately found themselves in shock. Not too far behind them, standing where they had entered the dungeon, was a man clad in armor, dressed like some kind of European knight, though instead of a visor attached to the helmet, a blue mask was attached to the face, and cold red eyes glaring back at them, carrying a sword and a shield. *'How did we not notice him?'* Akira thought, taken aback as he slowly stepped back with the other two. *'We should have heard his footsteps if he's wearing a suit of armor!'*

The knight stepped forward, ever slowly, eyes locked on them. Even from this distance, Akira could feel killing intent radiating from him. "W-who are you?" Makoto asked, shaken. "W-what do you want?"

The knight didn't answer. Instead, he continued to stalk forward, the hand holding the sword twitching madly. The group continued to grow nervous. Akira's eyes shifted behind them. There was a

straight path down through another gate, but knowing their luck, it was probably locked. On the other side of the river, though, the gate was open. "Sakamoto-san," he whispered to the blonde. "How fast can you run?"

"W-what?!" Sakamoto stared at him, startled. "The eff is that supposed to-"

"How fast can you run?"

"...fast enough. Why? You got a way outta here, new guy?"

Akira nodded, gesturing to the gate. He looked back at the knight. It was only a few feet away from them now. Makoto and Akira shared a look of understanding with one another, and Ryuji gave a nod, seemingly understanding the plan. The knight then took another step, and the group bolted. Their feet pounded against the stone, heading straight down. Almost immediately, the knight then began running after them, metal clanking loudly and making enough noise to raise the dead. Akira ran ahead of the group, though he looked over his shoulder to see if Ryuji and Makoto were staying with him. They reached the gate, and just as he suspected, it was locked, held in place by a thick chain. They didn't run to hit a dead end, though.

When they reached the gate, Akira rounded on his heel, and jumped atop one of the floating cage tops. The stream had several things of junk floating in it, and as luck would have it, next to the large steel bars that had blocked any other access further in with the exception of the gates placed into it was a cage, floating in the water and half-submerged. He landed on the other side, and turned to find Makoto already atop it, taking another jump and landing next to him. Ryuji had barely avoided the knight as he jumped, letting it crash into the gate. The sound of metal striking metal harshly met their ears as the knight was thrown off its feet and sent on its back. An audible, warped voice groaned as the armored soldier tried to get up, albeit very slowly.

"Damn, nice going!" Sakamoto said as he landed next to him, grinning. "You got some guts, new guy."

"Run now, talk later," he said, still weary. Thankfully, the blonde

didn't seem like he wanted to pull up an argument, and they were already moving away. If his guess was right, that knight was probably not the only one inside the castle. Still, though...what was this feeling? The atmosphere was uncomfortable enough, but that knight...something about him seemed horribly wrong. It wasn't just the killing intent radiating off of him, there was something else, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Eventually, they had reached the end of the road, though there was a wooden door next to them, perhaps in hopes a place of refuge for them to catch their breath. Akira huffed heavily, propping his elbow on the wall while Makoto leaned against and Sakamoto had his head low, hands on his knees while he panted heavily.

"S-shit," he choked, sweat pouring down his face. "T-too...much running... Goddammit." He stood up straighter, and grit his teeth. "The hell was that all about? That bastard raised his sword when he was running at me! Was he trying to kill me or something?!"

"So it seems," Makoto said, now having a moment to catch her breathe. "At least we got away."

Akira would have liked to believe that, but the sensation at the back of his neck refused to cease. They weren't out of danger yet, not until they got out of this damned place. "Come on," he said, opening the door. "Let's go."

With that said, they went further down. They entered a long, spiral staircase, and while it was leading further in, they weren't about to complain. Before they could escape this place, they needed to collect themselves. Appearing in an unknown place through equally unknown circumstances was strenuous enough. They had to figure out what was going on before they could escape this place...if they could. Akira knew that there must be more knights in this castle, and if the one that chased after them was willing to kill them, he was sure that the next knights they would run into would try and do the same. They reached another door and entered, and were greeted with something unusual. It was a room, with steel bars to the left side, showing a walkway with a steady flow of water pouring out, pushed forward by a mill. In front was a wooden table and benches on either side, and beyond that, a large double wooden gate. Hanging above it was a banner.

"Training Hall of...Love?" Makoto read the banner with a look of disturb. "What does...that mean?"

Sakamoto shrugged. "Beats me," he said. "Nothing about this place makes any damned sense." He then sighed, scratching the back of his head. "Where the hell is that damned exit? You think its back at that ballroom looking place?"

"Probably," Akira responded. "For now, lets-"

He was promptly cut off by a shrill scream, one of agonizing pain. The three were taken off guard, eyes widening and turning towards the door. The screams were loud and echoing, pouring out from behind the gates. "The hell?!" Sakamoto yelled. "There's someone else here?!"

"Never mind that!" Makoto said, now alert and focused, worried about the ones making those screams. "Come on!" The boys followed her lead and pushed through the door, entering whatever laid inside.

What they found was...horrible.

It was torture. No matter how you looked at it, the sight before the three students was pure torture. The room was spacious, big enough to act as a storage room, though instead of walls, steel bars were held, and what laid beyond them were sights that were grotesque and horrible enough to make their faces turn pale out of distraught and horror. To the left, boys in red jerseys were tied to what looked like a volleyball net, their arms wrapped and bound in wires while several knights had them forced on their knees, and cracking whips, whacking them harshly at their backs. To the right, they were forced to run on a giant treadmill, running as fast as possible lest they be crushed by the spinning wheels of spikes turning at the end of the mill. A single thermis hanged in front of them, dangling like it held something precious. And at the very front, a single teen was held up in the air with their arms above their head, wrists bound in iron while a cannon fired upon him. It didn't shoot cannonballs, but rather volleyballs, each smashing straight into his stomach.

"Oh my god..." Makoto whispered in horror, taking a few steps back. "T-this...this is horrible!"

Akira stared back in shock. His brain was trying to process what was going on. The knights were one thing, but this? This was...disgusting. Horrible. Someone was taking these poor people, and torturing them. However, in spite of the overwhelming wrongness displayed before his eyes, he noticed a recurring theme in the torture itself. The first was the volleyball net that the boys were tied too, the second being the treadmill with the thermis hanging in front of the boys like a prize, and the third was the cannon shooting volleyballs and the poor target hanging in front of it helplessly. *'What does any of this have to do with volleyball?'* he questioned. He shook his head. Now wasn't the time to be analyzing this! He had to help them!

Thankfully, it seemed Sakamoto shared his thoughts, as he turned back to the two with a fierce look. "Come on!" he urged them. "Let's get these guys out!" He wasted no time. In seconds, they were at the bars, inspecting them for any sort of unlocking mechanism for the gates, while Makoto went to another gate, trying to get it open. "Come on!" Sakamoto growled, trying to rip the door off its hinges. "Dammit, come on...!"

"...just stop it." Akira and Sakamoto stopped, looking at one of the boys. It was only now that the noticed that a few of the boys in that room weren't being tortured, but definitely showed signs of abuse. Bandages, casts, slings; almost any part of their body was wrapped up in white cloth, and bruises all across their face. "It's no use..."

"W-what?!" the blonde delinquent gawked. Akira understood his feelings perfectly. The boys looked so...defeated, and resigned to what was happening to them. Even those who were being whipped showed signs of reluctant acceptance of what was being done to them. It was like they just stopped trying to refuse this punishment, and accept it for what it was. But...that was crazy! No one would ever accept this! How could anyone accept being subjected to this torture?! "Are you nuts?! I don't know if you looked at yourselves, but you're seriously gonna-" Suddenly, Sakamoto stopped, and looked at the boy's face intently. Then, recognition flashed in his eyes, and he recoiled. "N-no way...aren't you...?"

"Sakamoto-kun," Makoto called out from where she was. Akira turned to look at her, and found a similar look of realization and disturb on her face as well. "These boys...they're all members of Kamoshida-sensei's volleyball team!"

Kamoshida...that name again. The teacher that was talking to Takamaki. The one Ryuji called a perverted bastard. The one that was depicted as a righteous golden knight in that painting. *'That's too much to be coincidence,'* Akira thought, looking back at the defeated forms of everyone in each of those rooms, subjected to torture. *'This place...its somehow connected to that Kamoshida. But why? Moreover, why are members from his club here?'* Suddenly, Sakamoto's actions of hostility upon the subject of Kamoshida came to mind, and suddenly, Akira was starting to have a clearer picture of Kamoshida now. *'Don't tell me...'*

"Kamoshida," Akira said, looking at Sakamoto. "Did he...abuse the volleyball team?"

Sakamoto grit his teeth, his knuckles turning white due to how hard he was gripping the bars. "Abuse?" he scoffed with absolute anger. "It ain't no abuse...its exactly the shit we're seeing here! This is what he did to the track team, all because it was becoming more popular than the volleyball team!" He began to thrash against the gate out of anger, screaming. "This is what this bastard does! He ruins lives, all because he thinks himself as the king of the castle!"

Akira's eyes softened. Sakamoto's reactions...it was clear that he hated Kamoshida with all of his being. He mentioned that Kamoshida had abused the track team (though Sakamoto had referred to this 'abuse' as what they were looking at now, the horrible torture being displayed before their very eyes), so Sakamoto must have known some of the members, or...he was part of the team. He had noticed that whenever Sakamoto had walked, there was a slight limp in his right leg, though he was still unsure of the reasons why. "Sakamoto-san..."

"Good grief, what a rackat..."

Suddenly, a cold wave of apprehension and unease spread across Akira's form when the voice, marred with annoyance, emerged from

behind. Quickly, the three students turned, and were greeted with quite the surprise. "K-Kamoshida-sensei?!" Makoto gasped. Standing next to three knights was the man of the hour himself, Suguru Kamoshida...only Akira noticed something very disturbing about the man. For starters, he wasn't wearing his clothes from earlier. Rather, he was instead dressed in a red cape with a fur lining, which covered up most of his body, though it ended at his calves, revealing immensely hair legs. At the feet, he wore simple brown loafers, and disturbling, he wore nothing underneath his cape, and the only thing covering his nether regions was a bright pink speedo. Atop his head was a golden, spiked crown.

However, what Akira noticed the most were his eyes. Pools of malicious, writhing gold that stared back with intentions laid before.

"I noticed three little tresspassers in my castle, but I didn't expect it would be you three," Kamoshida(?) chuckled, a cruel smile on his face. **"The Student Council President, the boy with the criminal record, and the Track Traitor...hahaha, what a find."**

Sakamoto growled, moving away from the cells. "Y-you son of a...!" Before Akira could stop him, Sakamoto charged, intending to throttle the man. Makoto shouted at him in worry, telling him to stop, but her words fell on deaf ears. Unfortunately, Sakamoto had forgotten about the knights, as one of them had stepped in front of Kamoshida(?), and rammed his shield straight into the charging blonde. He let out a cry as he was thrown back, his back smacking harshly against the cobblestone wall. He soon then crumpled to the ground in a heap. He would have gotten up, if not for the blades at his neck. "Dammit...!"

"As idiotic and as rash as you always were," Kamoshda(?) chuckled darkly before he looked at the remainder two. **"A shame your little friends are about to be executed as well."**

'Executed?!' Akira thought in shock. *'He can't be serious!'*

"Stop it!" Makoto shouted. "Are you out of your mind?!"

In response to her defiance, one of the knights closest to her

trudged forward, and slammed its shield into her, knocking her into the bars. Makoto let out a yelp, and fell to the ground. Before she had a chance to get up, the knight pinned her to the floor, and aimed its sword at her neck. The threat was more than clear. Meanwhile, the other knight trained its eyes at Akira, and slowly advanced. He gritted his teeth. This was crazy...what the hell was going on?! The torture was one thing, but this?! Just as the knight approached, Akira made a move. The armored soldier thrusted its shield forward with the intent of knocking him down, but he sidestepped at the last second, and then threw his weight into his shoulder, slamming himself into the knight. His labor bore fruit, and the knight was struck into the ground.

Unfortunately, Akira had miscalculated. Just as he turned around, a sudden black object came out of nowhere, striking him straight in the face. He was thrown back to the floor, and his glasses were smacked away, clattering to the floor. He groaned, getting back up to his feet, though as soon as he did, two rough hands grabbed him by the shoulders, and threw him against the wall, pinning him there. As the dizziness faded, he saw three more knights now presented, having entered just as he dealt with the one that was still on the ground. However, one was unique, in that it wore golden armor, and its mask was black in color, yet still had dreadful red eyes.

"Any who dare disobey Lord Kamoshida shall be executed," the golden knight boomed, his voice possessing a slight echo.

Kamoshida(?) laughed. **"Defiant brats, every last one of you,"** he said mockingly, giving a glare at the three students, though as he looked at Makoto, an unsavory glint passed through his eyes, and licked his lips. **"Although...I suppose I can spare at least one of you. It would be a shame to kill miss Student Council President here. After all, she's got quite the body~"**

"Y-you..." Akira felt anger swell up on his voice. Somehow, this situation seemed familiar, or at the very least, rubbed him the wrong way. This sense of wrongness, this feeling. He knew it from somewhere. Some part of him inside knew it too. "You bastard...who do you think you are?!"

Kamoshida(?) craned his neck, giving Akira a look of disinterest.

"Hmph, what a stupid question," he said before he smirked. **"I am Kamoshida...the king of this castle. I will say this, though...that look of defiance in your eyes...it really does irritate me."** Then, the self-proclaimed king turned his attention to Sakamoto, who glared back at him in anger and loathing. **"Well then, Sakamoto-kun...it's about time for your execution."**

"Fucking brat...I'll sue you for this!"

Suddenly, the situation became clearer to him now. This sensation, this feeling just from looking at the scene. That smug, condescending attitude...all of it...it was just like from back then! Back when he tried to help that woman, and he ended up getting in trouble for it! Out of anger, he struggled against the knights holding him down, but their grasp remained resolute. At this rate, Sakamoto was going to be executed, and so was he...and he didn't want to imagine what would happen to Makoto. That's why he had to fight, he had to. He wouldn't this happen. This whole thing...it was wrong! People like that were wrong!

'Why?!' Akira thought out of frustration. *'Why am I so helpless?!'*

Why indeed...

The frizzy-haired teen's eyes widened as a voice echoed. He ceased his struggling, and looked around the room. The guards still yet pinned him to the wall, the golden knight was preparing his blade, ready to bring it down on Sakamoto, and Makoto laid on the ground helpless, fruitlessly struggling. Kamoshida was still bearing that same arrogant smile on his face, ready to call for the blonde's death. No one had spoken, so...who was that? And that voice...why was it...

What's the matter? Are you simply going to watch? Will you simply allow yourself to be bound in the bindings of helplessness? Death awaits him if you do nothing.

'I know that, but I...'

Was your previous decision...a mistake then?

Akira's eyes widened, suddenly recalling the day when he was arrested. He remembered that day so vividly at this moment. The argument before he arrived, the man pulling on her clothes to try and force her into the car, him pushing the man off, the man getting hurt, and then the man suing him for the injuries he sustained. He lowered his head. That decision...the moment when it seemed like his fate had changed just by getting involved at that time...it was...

...it was no mistake.

'No...it wasn't!' Akira roared back as his eyes burned with anger. *'I'm not the one who's at the wrong here! No, it wasn't me who was the wrong...it's this damn world! The shitty adults who run it like its their goddamn given right! I refuse...I REFUSE to let someone dictate my future like they own it!'* Once more, out of resolution and rage, Akira struggled. *'If living means I have to give up my future...then I'd rather die!'*

...excellent.

With that lone word spoken, Akira's body became wracked with agony. As if out of nowhere, pain erupted within his very being. He let out a pained scream as he began to thrash around, the searing scorch of pain burning deep inside of him. It felt as if something was trying to rip itself out of him, deep from within his very body, clawing out viciously like a wild animal seeking freedom. The commotion earned the attention of those in attendance, with Makoto looking on in worry and helpless while Sakamoto looked on, confused and helpless. Kamoshida(?) stopped what he was doing, and looked at what was happening with Akira in confusion.

However, there was something that Makoto noticed, something that made her gasp.

Akira's eyes. They were no longer dark gray...they were shining, brilliant gold.

(cue: Persona 5 OST - Awakening)

Vow to me, the voice inside of his head demanded as the air around him began to grow heavier and more intense. Akira felt his body

beginning to heat up, as if someone had it a fire in him. I am thou. Thou art I. Thou who art willing to perform all sacrilegious for thine own justice! Call upon my name, and release thy rage! Akira let out one final scream before the pain had ceased, and his body went limp, leaning against the wall. Rather than pain, a new emotion filled his being. Suddenly, the air grew more intense, and even from where she was, the Student Council President felt the wind around her beginning to blow, as if a storm was about to be unleashed.

Without warning, a powerful gust of wind erupted around Akira, throwing the guards away from him and smashing them straight into the wall, where they crumbled to the ground and did not move. The golden knife was knocked away, stumbling back a bit while Kamoshida(?) remained on his feet, albeit struggling from the force of the wind.

Show the strength of thy will to ascertain all on thine own, though thou be chained...

Akira stepped forward, and raised his head. Blue flames danced around his face for a split second before a white mask, avian in form, manifested on his face.

...to Hell itself!

Then, without any hesitation, Akira grabbed the mask, and proceeded to tear it off. To both Makoto and Sakamoto's horror, as the mask was removed from his face, blood gushed, staining his skin and around his eyes. The white mask remained in his grasp as his arms hung to his sides, and his head lowered. Slowly, almost tauntingly so, and increasing Kamoshida(?)'s growing disturb, Akira raised his head, revealing the golden eyes, and his mouth curling into a toothy, maddened grin. After the pain that had agonized him had come a wonderful euphoria. Even now, he felt it rushing through him, struggling and demanding to be released. Makoto and Sakamoto couldn't see what he did. Nor the knights, or Kamoshida(?). But he did. The chains that bound his wrists, keeping him from releasing that which would grant him the power he needed.

The power...to wipe that fucking arrogant look off of that shitty adult in front of his face.

And thus, he whispered the single word that sealed Kamoshida(?)'s fate,

"...persona."

As if released, the chains binding his wrists shattered apart. The blood around his face began to part, and soon the flames that created the mask began to burn, enclosing his form. First it was his face, but then it began to grow, slowly taking over his entire body. Red flames flickered within the red, forming on his face to create a devilish grin and slanted eyes. Claw-like hands took over his digits, and the flames grew outward from his hip, creating something reminiscent to that of a cloak. Then, the flames began to move, removing itself from Akira, and revealing him safe and unharmed...though his Shujin Academy uniform was gone. Instead, in its place, was attire reminiscent to that of a magician. He wore a black trench coat, a gray-collared shirt with black trousers, boots pressed against the foothold beneath him, and red gloves at his hands.

Behind him, the flames began to solidify, taking on a physical shape, and leaving all in attendance quaking with various emotions. It was easily twice the size of Akira. Wearing a red coat, the length of the clothing only made it up to the mid-back of the thing. A black mask with red designs made it seem like it had horns. Two gigantic black wings spread themselves out in a flourish and showy motion. Massive red boots with bladed heels were worn at the bottom to create a rather dignified yet dangerous look. Then, there was a white scarf and a tall top hat as two articles of clothing a gentleman would wear along with a massive vest with red strings. Black-clawed fingers sprouted out from red fingerless gloves, ready to slice all those that stood in its path. Chains rattled and surrounded its body, as if the metal links were being bent to the will of the massive entity. Flames burned on the black mask, resembling sharp teeth curled into a wicked grin, and eyes narrowed into a taunting glare.

"W-what..." Sakamoto gawked, his mouth quivering as he stared in absolute awe. "...the hell...?"

Makoto shared similar sentiments, looking on with wonder. "Kurusu-kun..."

The frizzy-haired teen ignored them both. He was too engrossed, too overjoyed by this euphoria with him. And with it, the rage he held within him, now directed at the one standing before him. With a grin, easily as wicked as the being before him, he bellowed,

"Ravage them... **Arsene!** "

TO BE CONTINUED...

Persona Compendium:

Arsene - Fool Arcana: [A being based off the main character of Maurice Leblanc's Novels, Arsene Lupin. He appears everywhere and is a master of disguise. He is known to help law-abiding citizens.]

A/N: The last portion of the chapter seemed weak to me, but it's 8:36 right now as I'm typing this, I'm dead tired so...yeah...

Sixth Heist: Feline Flourish

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Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

Sixth Heist: Feline Flourish

"Ravage them... **Arsene** !"

The winged being, bearing the name of the gentleman thief, flourished its wings in response, as if a show of strength. The wind around him blew rapidly as dark energy, writhing and crimson,

danced around his claws. One knight got up to his feet, and shook off the sluggish motions before he charged forward, intending to cut Akira down. However, Arsene was faster. In a second, it was right in front of the knight, the flaming grin on its black mask still ever present before it swirled around and swung its leg. The blade attached to its feet cut through the steel plating of the armor like it was nothing, leaving behind a deep gash as it trailed along the body before slicing straight through the shoulder. The knight stumbled back as a guyser of black and red liquid spewed out before it fell to the ground. The armor than proceeded to break down into a mass, the same color as the liquid it bled, and stained the cobblestone ground beneath their feet.

The sight was a spectacle to behold. The five remaining knights looked on with Kamoshida(?) in utter shock, as Arsene had cut it down like it was nothing. Sakamoto still stared on, gawking at the carnage that one strike brought. Makoto remained mystified, her gaze lingering on Akira. The frizzy-haired teen's normally reserved and quiet nature was nowhere to be found. His eyes bore a loud determination, resolve reflected back in those pools of dark gray, and a ferocious smirk, armed with confidence and excitement, touched upon his face. The boy felt elated. This surge of power...it was *amazing* ! He could feel the strength Arsene had unleashed upon this place rolling on him, as if making a statement that this power, this...freedom...was his.

This power...this wonderful, amazing power...it was his.

Akira couldn't help but laugh, cradling his face. **"W-what the hell?!"** Kamoshida(?) growled, guarded by two of the five guards. Fury and confusion was written clear on his face, as well as fear. **"Who the hell are you?!"**

"Who, me?" Akira said as he brought down his face while the energy gathering around Arsene's claws continued to grow. "Akira...Kurusu, Akira. You can think of me as the guy who's gonna wreck you and this castle for all it's worth!" With a swipe of the arm, Arsene's gathering of power had reached a high point. The energy danced around its hand wildly, begging to be unleashed, and Akira was more than happy enough to oblige. "Take 'em down!" Arsene swirled around and slammed its hand straight into the ground. The writhing

mass of black and red energy was finally set loose, and burrowed into the ground, breaking apart the earth beneath it before it charged forward, tearing apart wood and stone before it found its target. It was the knight holding Sakamoto. Once it reached the armored soldier, the energy released itself from the ground and opened up, taking on the form of a ghostly head before it slammed its jaws down on the knight. Caught in the maw, the knight was helpless as the ghostly head dragged it forward and smashed straight into the wall, reducing it to black and red muck, splattered across a ruined wall.

Sakamoto, who had nearly been hit by the attack, let out a yelp and quickly moved away, taking cover behind Akira. However, he was still quite shaken, as his legs were quivering, and stared at Arsene wearily.

"What are you fools doing?!" Kamoshida(?) shouted at the knights. **"Execute these fools!"**

The knights obeyed the orders of their king, and moved in to attack. The golden knight held back at the rear, obviously the leader among the armored soldiers. Two of Kamoshida(?)'s guards went in to go attack Akira, but Arsene intercepted them. Like with the first one, it swung its leg, and slashed off the heads of the guards, letting their bodies tumble forward and become splattering, rolling mess of goo. One knight had managed to flank Akira, going in to attack him from the side. It reared back its sword, going in for a thrust. However, Akira was faster. He nimbly evaded it and then proceeded to deliver a heel kick to the back of its head, throwing it to the ground. The knight was about to get up, but Sakamoto acted quickly, and rammed his foot in its face, effectively knocking the knight out. The knight guarded Makoto still had her pinned, but his attention was centered on Arsene, who grabbed another knight heading its way, by the hand and smashed it straight into the ground, ending its life instantly, and watched it disintegrate into a black and red puddle. Seizing the opportunity, she elbowed it in the face, stunning it and giving her enough time to flip unto her back, tuck her legs in, and ram them into its chest, knocking it to the steel bars. Like with the knight on the ground, the strike knocked it out instantly.

With that done, only the golden knight remained. However, Kamoshida(?) was nowhere to be seen. No doubt he had fled when

he saw that things had gone south. Regardless, Akira was content with that. It actually brought some joy to him, knowing that he had effectively made someone like that run with his tail in between his legs. The gold knight stepped forward, dragging its sword along the shield and creating a scrapping sound that caused Sakamoto and Makoto cringe.

"Miserable wretch!" it roared. ***"You will pay for this transgression!"*** Then, its body began to spasm. Black liquid poured out through the gaps in the armor, and out from the mask. Suddenly, the mask shattered, and a writhing mess of black and red exploded out from the golden armor, though rather than spill out in a gory bath, it instead began to gather and form into a physical shape. The mess developed a humanoid form, and extending out from its back looked to be a pair of wings. Something slim extended out from what looked to be its hand. Then, the mass of black and red sinked in, and let the body take shape. What stood before them was what could be considered an angel, given the brilliant white wings behind its back, though it was dressed in chain mail with steel gauntlets and grieves, a slim blade in hand, and a helmet covering its face. ***"The price of your defiance of Lord Kamoshida...is DEATH!"***

"The hell?!" Sakamoto shouted in shock. "First you getting a new wardrobe, and now this?! The fuck?!"

Makoto was equally as shocked. Everything was happening far too fast. She couldn't tell what was going on, or what was happening. However, right now, she had to think. They needed to get out of here, but opposition met them. She doubted her aikido training could help her against this, and Sakamoto had no formal training...but so far, that thing, Arsene Akira called it, seemed to be more than capable. "Kurusu-kun," she asked, looking at him in worry. "Think you can open us a path?"

His response was a nod. He turned his attention to the monster before him, and mischief danced in his eyes. "Come on," he taunted. "Show me what you got."

"Arrogance!"

The Archangel charged at him, and Arsene met its charge. A brilliant

light danced around the blade while Arsene gathered the same malevolent energy in its claws. The two then clashed, and a blinding light engulfed the area, forcing the students to shield their eyes. Sparks flew between the two beings' clash before they parted, and began to strike at one another. Arsene swung its leg in an attempt to cut off its wing, but was parried by the thin sword it the Archangel's hand. It knocked Arsene back before it brought down its sword on it shoulder. The blade tore into the shoulder, and blue flames burned where the wound was made. Akira suddenly felt pain erupt in his shoulder, letting out a small cry of pain as he grabbed his arm. "H-hey!" Sakamoto shouted in concern. "You alright?!"

Akira hissed, gripping his arm. *'W-what is this?'* he thought. *'It felt like someone just cut me...wait.'* He looked back at Arsene, who grabbed the sword with its claws before delivering a kick to the Archangel's stomach, sending it crashing into the wall before it gathered energy again, and slammed it straight into its stomach, plowing it straight through the stone and into the room where they entered the so-called 'Training Hall of Love.' *'I see...any damage Arsene I takes, I feel as well.'* Well, it seemed there was more to this power that just calling upon a being from within him and commanding a power reminiscent to darkness. Whatever Arsene was, it was apart of him. How, and why, he wasn't sure. He was just high on the rush of power he felt, though the pain in his shoulder had now calmed him. He still felt the amazing strength this power grant him, but now he could act more carefully. He looked back at the two. "Come on!" he urged them. They nodded, and followed him out the room. They passed Arsene, who kept his grip solid on the sword while he pinned down the Archangel.

Before Akira was out of range, Arsene finished the fight before its link with him could be disconnected. It gathered another pulsating mass of dark energy into its palm, and this time, gripped Archangel's head before allowing the power to be set free. A morbid, muffled scream ripped from the Archangel's throat before the dark power had ripped it apart, reducing it to black splatters, splashing against the ground. If possible, the flaming grin on the mask grew wider as it swiped its arm, and then its form burned, engulfed in azure flames before disappearing.

TakeYourTime

"Hurry! There are intruders in the castle!"

"We must deal with them, in the name of Lord Kamoshida!"

"Do not let these knaves escape!"

The knights were constantly moving around in a panicked tizzy and panicked, sometimes crashing into one another. The dungeons were in complete chaos. After Kamoshida(?) had escaped the wrath of one of the intruders, he ordered his knights to hunt them down and kill them. The knights obeyed the order and began to search for them, and left nos tone unturned. They checked rooms, cells, barrels, anything that would hide them. However, as they moved about in a panic, they had not noticed that one of the cells was unoccupied...and the cage door was left unlocked, slightly ajar. Its former occupant was hiding atop the rafters above the guards, crouched down and surveying the situation. They were listening carefully, hearing the reports. From the sounds of it, someone had infiltrated the castle, either by choice or by pure coincidence...and from the way these guys were panicking, one of them was already causing enough trouble for the so-called king of this place to take them serious.

There was no way it was someone who got lucky in taking down down of these things. No, they had enough strength to destroy them. If the intruders had what they thought they had...then things suddenly got a lot more interesting.

"I should probably find these intruders the guards are talking about," they noted to themselves, bearing a boyish voice. "After all, if they have a Persona, then my job just might get a little bit easier."

With that in mind, they scurried along, moving deep within the shadows to avoid being seen.

TakeYourTime

By the time the three students returned to where they had entered the second level of the dungeons, they were exhausted. The

overwhelming high and adrenaline from using Arsene's power had long since faded, leading Akira to be panting slightly, propping his back against the wall. "D-dammit..." Sakamoto groaned, lying flat on his back. "T-too...much running!" He sat up, shaking his head. "Okay, this castle is beyond weird! What the eff was that back there?!" he shouted, pointing a finger at Akira. "A-and what the heck is up with that outfit?!"

"I don't know," Makoto panted, her elbow propped against the wall. "But...as it stands, Kurusu-kun's the only means of defense we've got against those...things."

"W-whatever!" Sakamoto shook his head. "We need to go back!"

The Student Council President stared at the blonde delinquent like he was insane. "Sakamoto-kun, are you insane?!" she said in disbelief. "We nearly got killed back there!"

"But those guys are still there, aren't they?! he reasoned, having trouble getting back on his feet, yet the resolved look on his face was strong. "That means they're still gettin' tortured! We've gotta go back!"

Makoto wasn't about to budge. Akira understood where Sakamoto was coming from, but he agreed with Makoto. "Chances are, Kamoshida called in for more guards," he reasoned with the blonde. "If that's the case, then we can't stay. The longer we stand around here, the more danger we're in. Sakamoto-san, I know you want to save them...but we can't. Not in this situation."

"But...!"

"Sakamoto-kun," Makoto said, her face showing she wasn't happy about this decision either. Her hands were clenched tightly, and was barely holding herself together. "We'll come back for them...I promise."

Sakamoto looked like he wanted to argue further, but lacked the means. Eventually, he looked off to the side, scowling. "Dammit..." he muttered before he looked back at Akira. "Well...I guess we better bust ass, then," he said before he noticed something. "Huh?

Wait, when'd you get that mask back?"

Akira was confused by Ryuji's words until he felt his face, and to his surprise, unknown to him, a mask had reappeared over his face. The same one he had ripped off. *'When did it come back?'* he thought, removing it from his face and looking at it. As he did, he found himself, for the briefest moment, thinking back to when he called for Arsene to emerge. *'Could it be...that this mask is my power itself?'*

"There's a lot of questions I have about earlier," Makoto told him, looking at Akira with serious concern. "But for now, let's get out of here. We shouldn't be far from where we came from." The two boys nodded at her, and followed her. They passed through the dungeons once again, though they didn't get far. Much to their frustration, several guards were now posted throughout the area, constantly shifting around and alert. "Shoot...looks like Kurusu-kun was right. Kamoshida-sensei must be really angry about what happened earlier." Makoto muttered as they hid behind a nearby stack of crates. The red-eyed girl was peeking out, observing the enemy's movements and trying to find a pattern before she pulled back. "Although, I have to wonder...was that really him?"

Sakamoto scoffed. "Who else would it be?" he asked. However, as he thought back to their encounter, his face fell into a look of confusion. "Though, now that you mentioned it...Kamoshida *did* seem a bit different."

"Like his clothes?" Akira joked, knowing what they meant but wanted to lessen the tension.

"Okay, well, that too, but something else...Kamoshida's pretty damn good at covering up what he does. He got away with abusing the track team and making it seem like it was practice after all, and he's shrewd, but...when he showed up, he was...uh, how do I put it...?"

"More direct," Makoto helped. "Like...he was showing his true colors." She then peeked out again, and cursed. "There's one coming!" She looked back at Akira. "We could try and take it down quietly...but on the off chance we draw attention, do you remember how to summon that...Arsene thing again?" Akira nodded. Though

he was still uncertain, part of his mind already seemed to know how to conjure forth the being from before. His hand came to his mask, and upon recalling that feeling, that moment of euphoria, flames danced around the mask, earning a startled look from Sakamoto, no doubt worried the mask would be set ablaze. Makoto, however, took it as his way of saying 'yes,' and gave a nod. She then looked at the blonde delinquent. "Sakamoto-kun, I'm going to need your help. Ready?"

Sakamoto, getting over his shock, nodded, and carefully edged himself close to her. The two looked around, and saw that most of the guards were a bit away from their location, except the one gradually approaching. Sakamoto braced himself for an inevitable fight while Makoto was nervous. She hoped this would work well. "Alright...on three," she whispered. "One...two..."

"GAH!"

The sudden cry startled the three students, as well as the knights, as they all turned. Makoto, curious, edged a bit further now that the knight close to them was turned away and facing the commotion. The other two knights on the other side were caught in the apparent commotion; in fact one of them was on the ground, cradling its armored head.

"You alright?" one of the knights asked. ***"What happened?"***

"I don't know...something just slammed into my helmet, then-"

Suddenly, a black shape dropped in front of them. The two knights, startled, stepped back, but before they could ready themselves, a silver gleam passed through them, and a second later, the same black and red fluid that they had been seeing emerge from these monstrous knights spewed out as they fell back, soon melting into the stuff. The knight close to the three gasped in shock, and readied his sword. Unfortunately, because he was in the way, Makoto couldn't see who had dropped down. ***"W-what in the hell?!"***

"Come to me!" a boyish voice bellowed. " **Zorro** !"

A pillar of blue light engulfed the spot where the shadow had dropped. Just like with Akira, a powerful gust of wind blew through the whole area, causing the stream of water to crash forth into rolling waves. Slowly emerging from the brightness was a humanoid figure as well. But this one was much more larger than Arsene muscle-wise. The upper half of its was huge and ripped. The head was normal sized though, fitting snugly between the large, black collar of the massive leather jacket with silver designs it wore. A massive cowboy hat was crammed onto the skull, having eyes right at the front of the accessory as vision or show. A black cape fluttered with its showy appearance. Despite the beefy build, its skinny legs complimented the rest of the body perfectly by fitting leather pants with black pointed boots. To hold up the pants, a large red and silver belt was worn with a massive Z buckle. A sheath was fitted into the belt while the rapier it belonged to looked like a mere stick in the being's massive hands.

The beefy swordsman held its rapier, swishing to form a 'z' before it aimed its weapon straight at the knight. Wind gathered around the weapon before it launched forth, shooting straight toward the knight, who was helpless as the blast of wind struck him dead on in the center of the chest, knocking him right off his feet, and crashing right through the steel gates. He then crashed into the water. At first, the students thought he would reemerge. Instead, the water became tinted with blackish red.

"...the hell?" Sakamoto questioned as he stood up, looking at the demolished gate and then looking at the beefy swordsman, only to see it gone. "Wait, w-where'd that thing go?!"

"Whatever it was," Makoto said, folding her arms. "It was the same as that Arsene thing."

Akira nodded in agreement. That power was definitely similar, though the feeling he received from it was...different. With Arsene, he felt a wild mix of emotions. Anger, excitement, rage, sadness, joy, enlightenment. Positive and negative, merged together like a yin-yang. However, from that second being...he felt only a sense to strive. To achieve success and power, alongside clarity. A powerful will resonated from its form, and with it, a determination that Akira had never felt before. Still, he wondered who it was that saved them.

He soon pulled out from his hiding spot, moving next to the two. As he did, he heard a voice, the boyish one from before, call out from behind.

"So I was right...you do have a Persona!"

The group turned...and stared. At first, they saw nothing in front of them until they looked down. What was in front of them was...bizarre. At first, Akira assumed it was a cat, given that it had paws and a tail wishing out from behind its form. However, there were many things inconsistent with that. For starters, the head was larger and rounder than any cat's head. A yellow bandana was wrapped around its neck, almost like a collar. Perhaps the most obvious and glaring fact about the thing was that it was standing on its feet, while its front paws were crossed over its arms. It had white hands and feet while the upper half of the face, or what he assumed was the face, was black like the rest of it, almost as if wearing a mask, and large blue eyes that stared at him with amazement. Around its waist was some kind of tool belt of some sort, and strapped to it was a large blade, almost the size of a cutlass.

"What's the matter with you three?" the strange creature asked, tilting its head in confusion. "Do I have something on my face?"

At first, there was only a dead silence. The rushing water and the rustling of chains hanging and the cackling of the torches that set the dungeons alight were the only sounds provided. However, if only for comical sense, one could even hear crickets in the background. Eventually, however, the silence was broken - naturally by Sakamoto, who's eyes became the size of softballs, threatening to pop out while his jaw hung open. Makoto shared a similar, but less extensive reaction, and shouted in sync with him while Akira stared in utter deadpan curiosity.

"A TALKING CAT?!"

This proved to be the wrong choice of words, as the strange creature developed a tick mark above what Akira thought was its eyebrow, and screamed to the high heavens,

"I'M NOT A CAT DAMMIT! I AM THE GREAT MORGANA!

REMEMBER IT!"

TO BE CONTINUED...

Persona Compendium:

Archangel - Justice Arcana: [Eight of the nine order of angels, their duty is to humans and deliver messages. They are at constant war with the fallen angels.]

Zorro - Magician Arcana: [A masked swordsman of justie who fought in California against corrupt officials during the era of Spanish rule. He always left his "Z" mark with his rapier wherever he appeared.]

Seventh Heist: Great Escape

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Since time immemorial...they were known as,

"Tricksters."

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

Seventh Heist: Great Escape

"I AM NOT A CAT DAMMIT! I AM THE GREAT MORGANA! REMEMBER IT!"

Akira cringed as he tapped his ear to make sure it was still in working order. The cat, Morgana it called itself, had quite the pair of

lungs if it could yell in such a loud manner. It even took Makoto and Sakamoto by surprise, as they recoiled from its shout. "The eff is this?!" the blonde delinquent shouted. "First ending up in a damn castle completely out of nowhere, then this guy getting a costume change on top of summoning some demonic monster, knights actually demonic sons of bitches, and now a talking monster cat?! What's next?! Pigs flying?!"

"Hey!" Morgana growled. "I just told you! Actually, that's even more insulting, calling me a monster cat!"

"I-it's talking..." Makoto whispered, unsure whether to be amazed or downright terrified. "A-am I dreaming?"

"If we're dreaming," Akira quipped. "Then nearly being killed is pretty much a nightmare."

Morgana sighed, pressing a paw to its head as it shook its head. "Good grief," it groaned. "First human beings I can actually hold a conversation with, and they think I'm some kind of monster."

"S-sorry," Makoto got over her shock, and bowed her head. "It-it's just...we've, well, never seen anything like you." Sakamoto nodded strongly in agreement. "A-anyway, Morgana, was it? What...was that thing you just did?"

"You mean Zorro?" Morgana asked, earning a look of confusion among the three. "Its my Persona."

"Persowhatnow?"

Morgan gave the two a look, and then turned to Akira. The frizzy-haired teen grew a curious look as he folded his arms, cocking his head in a questioning manner. This seemed to make the cat-like creature realize that none of them knew what he was talking about, causing his already large cartoon eyes to widen. "W-wait, seriously?!" he gawked. "You have no idea what that power is?!" Akira gave a nod. Sakamoto and Makoto seemed to understand that the 'Persona' it was referring to was the being, Zorro, that was summoned earlier, as well as 'Arsene.' "Unbelievable..."

"L-look, as much as I want to know what it is you're talking about," Sakamoto growled, looking over his shoulder to see if any guards were coming. "We'd REALLY like to find an exit!"

Morgana perked up. "An exit?" he asked, earning a nod of confirmation. Then a sly grin formed on his face. "Well, then you all are in luck. I know a way out of here." This earned surprised yet relieved look on their faces. Morgana didn't bother to tell them if he was serious or not, as he turned around, and beckoned them to follow before he took off in a run, legs spinning in a white craze that vaguely resembled the way some cartoon characters ran.

Sakamoto sweat-dropped. "For real?" he questioned. "We're trusting our lives to a freaky thing."

"Well, he did save our lives," the student council president reasoned. "Nevertheless, we must trust him on this much." She turned to Akira. "Kurusu-kun, are you alright? What happened back there was..." She trailed off, looking at the ground while rubbing her arm nervously. She remembered how Kamoshida(?) looked at her with such a vile look in his eyes while about to execute Sakamoto and Akira. She had never felt so terrified in all of her life. She felt...helpless. Weak. The mere thought of such things angered her. It made her feel so damn useless, and she *hated* such a weak notion. Akira frowned in concern, noticing the look in her eyes. She then shook her head, banishing the thoughts immediately. "N-nevermind. Anyway, let's put our faith in Morgana for the time being."

The blonde delinquent still didn't looked convinced. Akira wasn't surprised, given everything that's happened recently. Regardless of however strange or bizarre the situation was...they had to place their faith in Morgana. With that in mind, they quickly followed him. In no time at all, they caught up to him while running up the spiral staircase they had entered from before they emerged out into the long hallway, which connected to the grand ballroom. "Hey, this is where we came from!" Sakamoto exclaimed, recognizing it immediately. "O-oi, Monamona! The exit's here?!"

"It's close by," Morgana answered before growling. "And don't call me that! It's *Morgana* ! Sheesh!"

Unfortunately, they had barely gotten ten steps into the ballroom before they found their apparent escape route blocked by several knights, all garbed in black armor. "Aw, crap!" Sakamoto wailed. "We got trouble!"

"You dare defy Lord Kamoshida, you fools?" one of the knights bellowed. ***"You won't leave this place alive!"***

Like with the golden knight in the 'Training Hall of Love,' the knights' bodies began to spasm as black liquid poured out of the gaps in the armor before exploding out, forming into solid shapes. This time, however, they were not greeted by angels. Instead, three inhuman beings blocked their path. One appeared to be some sort of Jack-o-Lantern, bearing a pumpkin head with a mischievous grin carved into as a mouth, a dark blue cape covering its non-existent body, and a white glove holding a lit lantern. Atop its head was a simple blue hat. Beside it was a black horse with red, murderous eyes and a white mane, and sprouting from its head were twin green curved horns, ready to bash them in. The third looked quite perverse, being quite small with dark red skin and barely considered human. It had leathery wings keeping it afloat, its skin wrinkled and tight on the bones while a sharp pointed nose stretched out from its face, and eyes clouded with lust, albeit not to the extent of Kamoshida(?) from earlier. It also, disturbingly, had what Akira was hoping was not its genetalia sticking out from the only thing keeping its groin covered, looking to be more like a red blade with black stains.

"Hmph, talk about lame," Morgana huffed arrogantly, crossing his small arms before turning to Akira. "Hey, Frizzy Hair. You can fight too, right?" Akira gave a nod. Even now, he felt something - Arsene - calling out for him to be released and raise havoc. The cat-like being smirked before he turned back to their foes. With a spin, he rammed his paw into the ground, and yelled, " **Zorro** !"

Blue flames danced around Morgana, and powerful gusts of wind blew around him, nearly throwing Makoto and Sakamoto off their feet. Behind Morgana, the beefy cat-like warrior appeared behind him, tiny rapier in hand with a fierce glare to match. Akira held a hand over his face as the mask erupted into flames. He felt no heat, only a cool breeze blowing across his skin, and the euphoria from earlier coming to brace him again. He followed Morgana's example

and allowed the one who reflected his heart's rebellious nature to surface. " **Arsene** !" Without further ado, the red-clad being formed behind him, a flaming grin at the ready and claws quivering, begging to cut into the creatures before them.

Morgana flicked his nose before folding his arms. "We will promptly shut them up!"

(cue: Persona 5 OST - Last Surprise)

Those six words spurred the monsters into action. The horse and pumpkin head charged at Zorro while the bizarre impish being flew right at Arsene, its long claws looking ready to tear into him. Neither Persona looked perturbed in the very least. Once the pumpkin head was within range, Zorro swung its saber, unleashing a gust of wind that swallowed the flying pumpkin in a shredding gale. The horned beast appeared to be unaffected by the winds, and continued to charge. Morgana smirked at its reckless advance, and mentally commanded his Persona to switch tactics. The outlaw raised its arm as its fist seemed to grow and expand, eventually transforming into an oversized boxing glove, much to the surprise of the onlookers. With a swift strike, the boxing glove shot forward and landed a critical blow on the Shadow's face, halting its charge and throwing it off its feet while its neck was snapped from the impact.

Its body crashed into the cut-up form of the pumpkin head, sending them to the ground. The horse-like being soon began to disintegrate, turning into the black and red muck the three were now accustomed to seeing.

Meanwhile, Arsene danced around the impish creature, avoiding its claws with ease. Akira noted that compared to the angel he fought before, this one was easier to deal with. However, it would make sense. The golden knights appeared to be far stronger, perhaps acting as generals of sorts while the black knights were standard soldiers. Regardless, he had Arsene evade another swipe before the demonic thief slammed its heel straight into its target, sending it crashing straight to the ground. Acting quickly, the writhing mass of black and red energy danced in its claws again before unleashing it, creating an unholy torrent that washed upon the downed enemy, breaking apart the ground. Dust and debris were kicked up as a

result, as well as a small shockwave. Akira was forced to shield his eyes from both the dust and debris, though it lasted for only a few seconds before he saw the imp stagger back up into the air, bruised. He clicked his tongue in annoyance. It seemed to be a bit more endurable than he expected.

"Heh, amateur," Morgana chuckled beside him. His Persona, Zorro, gathered more wind around its tiny saber. "Let me show you how its done!"

Once the power it built up was at its apex, the feline decided to end this. With a mental command, the Outlaw swung its sword, releasing the miniature tempest that it had been accumulating onto the imp. The perverted Demon wailed in agony as the sharp winds tore it asunder.

In seconds, it was ripped to shreds, and its now liquefied remains splattering against the floor. Akira was amazed, marveling at the excellent display of power. Absent-minded, he wondered if he could somehow perform such a feat as well. Noticing the horned beast getting back up to its feet and letting out a whine of anger, he decided to try and replicate what Morgana did. "Arsene!" he shouted. His Persona responded, and took flight, gathering the power into its claws and allowed it to build. Unlike before, he was trying to refine it and control it instead of simply let it run wild when it reached its maximum power. Surprisingly, the horned beast had burst into a charge, galloping and taking a mighty leap into the air. It rammed its horns into Arsene.

"Gah!" Once more, Akira felt the damage taken by Arsene transfer over to him. He gasped in pain, feeling something heavy crushing into his chests. Arsene was slammed against the wall, pinned by the horned beast and continued to apply pressure, as if trying to crush it. Arsene struggled while maintaining its gathering of power. Eventually, it decided to take matters into its own hands by grabbing its horns. With a grunt, it grabbed tightly, and proceeded to pull. With impressive strength, one horn was torn from its head. The result was a small spray of black and red gunk as the beast finally backed off, screaming in pain before Arsene proceeded to slam its now detached horn into its eyes.

The Beast whinnied as sharp pain manifested in its face. Using this moment of distraction, Akira decided it was time to unleash his power. Arsene brought his fingers together into a knife hand before jabbing into the Shadow's throat. From there, it released the gathered mass of dark energy, attacking it from the inside out. The resulting expansion of power practically ripped it apart, leaving nothing behind. A demonic visage was left in the wake as the energy that was released practically destroyed everything that used to be the demon. As it dissipated, Arsene vanished in a burst of blue flames, returning to the white mask that cloaked the upper half of his face.

"Not bad," Morgana praised. The other two students of Shujin carefully approached, seeing that the danger had passed. "That Persona is pretty strong."

Akira would have felt a bit proud at that, were it not for the aching pain in his chest. It seemed his thoughts from earlier were confirmed now. Any damage Arsene takes is returned to him. How annoying. He turned to Sakamoto and Makoto, and to his relief, found them unharmed. "You two okay?"

"For the most part," Sakamoto answered with a huff. "This stuff is effin' freaky...oi, Monamona!"

Morgana growled, taking offense to the name. "It's MORGANA."

"Whatever! Is the exit close by?"

"Just up ahead!"

Without anything further, the group made haste, moving into another corridor just opposite of the one they came from. Unlike this one, which led to a spiraling staircase, they found two doors. Sakamoto, in a mad frenzy of hope, burst ahead and tried to open one of the doors, but to his displeasure, it wouldn't open. "The heck?!" he growled. "It ain't opening!"

"...Sakamoto-kun?" Makoto called, earning his attention. The two were by the door to the left side, which was now open with Morgana casually strolling in, his steps in a hop. "I believe the exit is this

way." The boy's cheeks flushed pink. Akira had to restrain himself from laughing at the blonde's honest mistake, though he shared his sentiments. He wanted to get out of here as quickly as possible. Soon they stepped inside, revealing a rather lavish room with a number of bookcases, all lined with various tomes. On the tables were a few books left open, along with a couple of trinkets such as candles, a globe of the world, and such. Curious, Akira gave a quick look at one of the books, only to instantly turn his gaze away. *'Definitely Kamoshida's castle,'* he thought, cheeks flushed just from reading one sentence of the book.

"Okay, we're here," Morgana announced, turning to the group. However, the humans were skeptical as they looked around, finding no such exit point in place. However, Akira's gaze shifted up, finding what Morgana had intended to show them. The feline-like creature smirked. "Oooh, not bad, rookie~"

Sakamoto followed his gaze, and his eyes widened. "The vent?" he asked, surprised. "S-seriously? What is this, some kind of re-enactment of a phantom thief's escape?" he questioned, though for some reason, Akira found that statement to be on the nose. The two boys shared a look before they shrugged, using one of the nearby ladders placed on the bookcase to allow access to the top of the shelf and heading up on top, proceeding to carefully remove the bolts on the vent. Meanwhile, as they did so, Makoto looked at Morgana and smiled, crouching down to give him a slight scratch. "Thank you so much, Morgana. We're in your doubt."

"Meeeeoooow~" Morgana purred, momentarily forgetting his earlier proclimation of not being a cat due to the wonderful way the red-eyed girl scratched. To his slight disappointment she pulled away, but soon realized his blunder and gathered himself. "R-right...you're welcome," he said before turning serious. "But you better get out of here quick. The Shadows are probably already looking for you guys since you started causing a ruckus."

"Shadows?" Makoto inquired. "Is that what those monsters are called?"

"Yep. They're what guards this place."

"It's open!" Akira called as he undid the last bolt on the vent, allowing him and Sakamoto to remove it and gently set it against the wall, leaning against the entrance. Makoto nodded, and gave her thanks to Morgana once again before she made her way up. With a bow, he gave a slight grin. "Ladies first," he joked, though Makoto flashed him a small smile and entered the vent. Sakamoto went next, slipping through the opening. Before he entered last, Akira gave Morgana another look. "Next time, don't get caught," he said playfully before slipping into the vent.

"What cheek!" Morgana bristled, ticked off that the boy had the guts to tell him that. Soon after, though, he grinned. The power of his Persona...it was far different from Zorro's own power. Something about it felt unusual...as if its power was shifting constantly. Though Morgana had never encountered another Persona-user as of lately, he could still tell that power was special. "Hm," he murmured thoughtfully, crossing his paws. "That frizzy-hair might be useful." He then unfolded his paws and turned around, exiting the room before giving a quick look for any guards coming by. "Alright, back to hunting that Treasure! It has to be around here somewhere!"

TakeYourTime

"What in the holy hell is this?"

Akira found himself agreeing with Sakamoto's exclamation. When they entered the outside area, which more or less looked like the entrance to a castle, they got further in before noticing that the entrance to the place was more or less accessible by a drawbridge with thick cobblestone walls circling around them. Wooden beams and crates with piles of rope sat on either side of the open space, though what shook the three teens was that when they looked at what they assumed was the entrance to the ballroom was the front of a golden, magnificent castle, standing tall and proud with various banners with slogans regarding victory and prestige strewn about on the walls. The sky above them was dark, as if threatening to rain any second.

"We were really inside a damn castle," Sakamoto gawked, looking at the two in utter astonishment. "We were brought to a castle thanks to a damn phone app?"

Makoto could offer nothing. Even she found herself at a loss for words. At first she thought it must have been a recreational area of some sorts, though as they progressed through it, she was quickly growing more and more disturbed. Seeing this in front of her face solidified that they had somehow been through out of their school and into a death trap...but how? It was impossible to enter a space like this! It was also against common sense for a phone application to send them here in the first place! She turned to Akira, who also seemed stun. "Kurusu-kun?" she called, earning the boy's attention when a thought crossed her mind. "If that app on your phone brought us here...could it send us back, do you think?"

"Worth a try."

He took out his cell, which was still overtaken by that creepy eye before tapping it. As soon as it did, the screen glitched out, showing a notification.

[WOULD YOU LIKE TO RETURN TO THE REAL WORLD?]

"Real world?" Akira frowned, earning confusion from the two. Was this world fake somehow? Regardless, if it was going to let them go back, who was he to judge anything? Without further ado, he tapped 'yes'. When he did, the screen glitched out once again, covered in red and black static before an electronic voice rung out once again.

[Now returning to the real world,] the electronic voice said gratefully. **[Thank you for your hard work.]**

In that moment, the world around them became distorted once more. Black and red ripples danced along the surface of the castle, and even into the skies above them, yet none of the teenagers were even so much as touched by it. The castle walls and the giant castle itself were also beginning to warp and twist with the unusual phenomenon, changing into a more familiar shape. When the ripples ceased, vanishing without a trace, the three were left startled, as the surroundings were eerily familiar. "Y-you gotta be shittin' me," Sakamoto said as he looked around, ignoring the curious and odd stares the passing students gave him before looking at the gate. "That's where the drawbridge was...don't tell me...!" He ran over, passing by the gate, and looked at the nameplate.

"It can't be..." Makoto whispered. "You mean...that place...?"

Akira stood at the gate entrance, and looked at Shujin Academy. The sky above, the surroundings, even where the academy sat...it was all in the same setting as the castle before them, though rather than a bleak and dreary sky above, it was light orange, signifying the end of the day approaching. The fact hit them like a speeding truck, leaving them utterly floored and in disbelief while he looked back at his phone, glaring at the red eye which just seemed to stare back at him.

'We never even left the school...we were still here. That castle...was the school.'

After Akira finished recounting the experience, Sae gave him an incredulous look. He didn't blame her in the least, though he felt a bit more better. His head was still in a haze, and his body still ached from the bruising those bastards gave him, but somehow, he was beginning to push through the fog in his mind. "An app that threw you into a castle?" his guardian and probation officer questioned skeptically. "A talking cat? Monsters?"

"I didn't believe it at first," he said drowsily. "It should be impossible." Suddenly, a searing pain entered his head, causing him to wince and hold his head. "Nngh..."

"Are you alright?" Sae asked worriedly. As much as she needed a good idea as to how the Phantom Thieves began, and more importantly, how they were capable of stealing the hearts of others, she had developed a good relationship with him enough to worry about his well-being. Thankfully, Akira nodded, shaking his head to wear off the pain. He didn't seem to be lying, and his eyes remained trained on her the whole time. Even still, the story was ludicrous...though the way he told it was...

"Do you want me to go on?" he asked. Sae paused in her thinking. Though it sounded crazy, she knew Akira wouldn't lie. With that in mind, she gave a nod. "After we got out of there, we were confused. We knew there was no way a castle could be the school, or that an

app could do that...we were going to leave it alone." There was a tense pause there at the end, as he clenched his hands. "We should have...but then it happened."

Sae didn't even need to ask. She already knew what he was about to say. Especially as a cold look formed in those hazy eyes.

"We couldn't leave Kamoshida alone...after what happened to Suzui-san."

TO BE CONTINUED...

Persona Compendium:

Pyro Jack - Magician: [A drunkard who tricked the Devil out of taking him to Hell. When refused entry to Heaven, he was forced to wander the earth with only an ember as a light.]

Bicorn - Hermit: [An evil creature with two curving horns. It represents impurity, unlike the Unicorn. Said to be derived from Re'em in the Bible. Another legend says that it feeds off of disloyal husbands.]

Incubus - Devil: [A male demon of European lore in medieval times. They visit sleeping women and have sexual intercourse with them; the resulting children become witches and wizards.]

A/N: Dear god in heaven, I am SO SORRY for this late update! I got distracted, had school work to focus on, graduation stuff, working on other stories, writing new ones and...yeah, sorry about that.

Anyway, first off, I'd like to apologize for last chapter's blunder. In it, Morgana actually called himself a cat, but instantly became pissed when he was called a cat. That was an error on my part. It was twelve AM, I was tired...yeah, sorry about that.

Secondly, regarding how the chapter ended, before you go raising a stick, there's a lot of ways you can take how Akira said this. While I

am deviating from canon a bit in some areas, I'm certainly not deviating from certain scenes such as Ryuji wanting to head back into the Palace and investigating the abuse and whatnot.

Third, I want your guys' opinions. Should I add in the DLC Personas? There are a few events in the story where I am contemplating having Akira summon a few of them, but I want your guys opinion on the matter first.

Lastly, big thanks go to Daemon of Wrath for helping me with the fight scene. Couldn't have done it without you, pa!

Alright, that's it for now! Later losers, and I'll see you in the next heist!

Eigth Heist: Starting Point

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Since time immemorial...they were known as,

"Tricksters."

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

Eighth Heist: Starting Point

"This can't be," Makoto whispered as she, Sakamoto, and Akira stared at Shujin Academy, completely and utterly baffled. "All of this time, we were still in Shujin? T-that isn't possible!"

"Makes about as much sense as that damn app and furball,"

Sakamoto gave his two cents before frowning. "A-and was that seriously Kamoshida? I mean, bastard looked way different from-"

"Well this is an curious sight," a familiar voice called out. The group turned, and the blonde delinquent scowled fiercely while Makoto became tense. Approaching them was none other than Suguru Kamoshida, clad in his gym attire. "The transfer student, Sakamoto-kun and Niijima-chan. That's an odd combination if there ever was one."

Sakamoto's face twisted into a scowl, his hands balling into fists. "Kamoshida..." he whispered in anger. "You son of a-!" Before he could rush up and ram his fist into the man that caused them so much grief earlier, Makoto's hand snaked around his wrist, preventing him from acting. "Wha-?! Prez!"

"Hold a moment," she hissed, her eyes giving him a warning glare. Something about it must have scared the crap out of him, as Sakamoto immediately backed down, though he still scowled. Akira shared his sentiments, however. He felt a rather strong urge to hit the man himself, though he noticed something was off. The first was the obvious sight, in that he was back in his regular gym clothes, but his eyes were no longer yellow: they were back to those cold eyes that well hid the animosity they no doubt held. Secondly, Akira could no longer fee that sense of wrongness from earlier. Makoto then bowed her head. "Sorry for staying so late, Kamoshida-sensei. I had stayed behind to help Kurusu-kun get more familiar with Shujin, and Sakamoto-kun was kind enough to help."

Kamoshida scratched his chin. "Is that right?" he inquired. "Well, at least he's doing something other than being so laid-back. He wasn't like that back during his days in the track team." Sakamoto's eyes flared with rage upon those words, and would have lashed out again were it not for Makoto giving him another warning glare. The teacher then looked at Akira, who merely pushed up his glasses. "You're Akira Kurusu, the transfer student, is that right?" he asked. "I'm Kamoshida, the gym teacher and coach for the volleyball team."

"It's a pleasure," he said, bowing his head. Strange how the man asked that, given that he identified him as the transfer student just moments ago. "I hope I won't be a burden."

"My word, how polite," Kamoshida chuckled. "Keep up that attitude, and I'm sure you'll live through Shujin, no problem." He then folded his arms, looking at Makoto. "Then again, with Niijima-chan looking after you, I suppose that's pretty much a given. Although, if I were you, I would head home. It is rather late."

Sakamoto frowned. "Late?" he questioned before he took out his phone. His eyes widened, seeing the time. "The hell?! How long were we in there for?!"

"Well, you kids take care now!"

With that, Kamoshida took his leave, waving at them jovially as he turned his back toward them, and entered the school. Meanwhile, the three teens were left confused and disoriented. The sky was tinted orange when it should have been blue. It only turned orange when it was close to dusk. With that in mind, it made Akira wonder how much time had passed since they entered that strange world. "None of this makes any damn sense," Sakamoto growled, scratching his head in frustration. "First that damn app of yours sends us to some weird-ass castle, and then we saw that dungeon, and-and then Kamoshida in that getup, then...gah, what the hell?!"

"I'm confused as well," Makoto bit her lip, cupping her chin. "Kurusu-kun's clothes returned to normal as well. Actually, about that," she turned to him, eyes softening in concern. "Are you alright, Kurusu-kun?"

"I'm fine."

It was a lie. His chest hurt like hell as if a football jock had smashed into him at full force, weighing 200 pounds of pure muscle, and his shoulder burned as if someone had taken a hot knife to it. However, he couldn't let it show. Things were crazy enough as is. That said, however...he felt elated still. As if chains had been removed from his wrists and ankles. His spirit, which should have been low, felt like it was soaring. Like he was finally free...or something. The two looked unconvinced, but they otherwise remained accepting of his answer.

"What the hell was that back there, anyway?" Sakamoto asked. "I mean...that dude in the cape, that WAS Kamoshida...right?"

There was no real sure answer. Compared to the identical man they encountered back in the castle, the Kamoshida they met just now seemed perhaps a bit more...amicable, and casual and more pleasant. That said, Akira wasn't fooled. He could see the subtle body movements and facial twitches. The way he talked about Sakamoto was almost sneering, noticing how his lips curled at times. Whatever the case was, it was hard to tell for sure. That said, Akira was just glad to be alive. And out of that horrible place.

"I don't know," the Student Council President shook her head. "At any rate...all of this is too much. And...I feel so exhausted."

"Right with you there," Sakamoto groaned, holding his head. "Feels like somebody took a hammer to my head." A moment later, he gave a shrug and then grinned, looking at Akira. "Also, thanks for saving our asses back there. That thing with the clothes and that Persona thing was freakin' awesome." He extended a hand. "The name's Ryuji Sakamoto."

"Kurusu, Akira," the frizzy-haired teen smiled, taking his hand. "A pleasure to meet you, Sakamoto-san."

"Hey hey, no polite crap, aright? Just call me Ryuji!"

Makoto sighed, shaking her head. "Free-spirited as always," she mumbled, though she couldn't help but feel envious. Given the pressure at school and whatnot, she couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to step into Ryuji's shoes and live a normal life for once, uncaring of what life had to throw at you and whatnot. For now, though, she had other concerns. "Well, it is getting late. Why don't we head home for the day?" she suggested, though that question seemed to be directed at Akira more than the two boys. "After all, if we stay any longer, Sis may not be so forgiving."

"You have a point," Akira conceded. He definitely did not want to imagine a rather peeved Sae Niijima glaring at him while demanding an explanation...and out so late with her younger sister at that. He was on a short-enough leash as is. He turned to Ryuji, and bowed his head. "See you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, sure," Ryuji nodded. The three then parted ways, taking their

leave. As they did so, however, Ryuji frowned as he looked at Shujin Academy, staring at it as if he expected it to change back into that castle. His eyes caught sight of Kamoshida in one of the windows, talking to what looked like a girl without the blazer. Her hair was tied up in a ponytail. If he remembered right, he thinks her name was Suzui. "Damn pervert," he scowled heavily, remembering what had happened to him in the past. The ache in his leg wouldn't dare allow him to forget what happened between him and that bastard. However, even still, he was confused. "Was that...really Kamoshida?"

A moment, then he shook his head. His head ached so much, it hurt just to even think. He shook his head, and made his way back home. He didn't want to make his mother worried.

TakeYourTime

"We're home!"

Sae turned away from her laptop, sitting at the large table near the kitchen with a rather scrutinizing glare in her eyes. "You're home awfully late," she said, her tone clearly suspicious. Both Makoto and Akira winced, feeling the immense pressure the woman was exerting. If they were to describe it, they felt as if they were being held down by some unruly force, grabbed by the throat, pressed against the wall, and a glare that spelled death for them for even the slightest action. "I hope you two weren't fooling around."

"We're sorry," Makoto apologized. The two had expected Sae to act this way, so they had devised an excuse on the way home. "I was showing Kurusu-kun around the school when classes ended, and decided to show him around Shibuya. One of the second-years, Sakamoto-kun, decided to tag along, and things got a bit...animated. Sorry for worrying you, sis."

Sae didn't look quite convinced, though she relented, giving a sigh. "Well, at least the two of you are aware," she said tiredly. The two noticed that she seemed a bit exhausted, no doubt because of her jop. Akira also noticed a picture of a man's face on her laptop, most likely her newest case. "At any rate, how was your first day at Shujin, Kurusu-kun?"

"Eventful," he answered wistfully. "Everyone found out about my record, no surprise there, nearly got killed in a castle owned by a perverted king, awakened to some supernatural power, met a talking cat, and got a new friend." Makoto's jaw hit the ground, staring at Akira in utter dismay by his cheeky response, accompanied by the beginnings of a grin. "All in all, quite the day."

Sae quirked an eyebrow, confused by the majority of the response. Castle? Supernatural power? Must have been a game he was playing or something. However, she did catch one thing that earned a bit of attention, however. "Wait, what do you mean found out about your record?" she questioned sharply. "The faculty was supposed to keep that under wraps."

"Someone leaked it all over the school website," Makoto told her sister, clearly angry. She would talk with Akira about his words earlier, but remembering how someone blatantly posted such private information on a public site was enough to get her in a foul mood. As a Student Council President, the well-being of the students was her first priority, so Akira's private information being revealed like that had certainly set her off. "Worse, everyone keeps spreading more and more rumors. Its horrible."

The prosecutor clicked her tongue, shaking her head in disappointment. "Unbelievable," she muttered. When she was at Shujin, the likelihood of such a thing ever happened was next to none. School had changed quite a bit, hadn't it? Had the teachers become incompetent? Or was it simply the inability of the Principal from keeping his own subordinates in check? Either way, such a thing was quite concerning. A student's private information, especially one like Akira's, was not something that should be shown to everyone. "And has there been any other problems?"

"Not really."

Makoto turned back to Akira, once again taken aback. "How can you say that?!" the girl cried. "Kurusu-kun, this is serious!"

"How do you figure?" he asked quizzically. "Rumors are just that, rumors. If they want to believe it, let them. It isn't like it will cause me any trouble." Suddenly, a yawn emerged from his throat. He stifled

it, and realized just how tired he was. His feet felt like they were struggling to support his own weight, his shoulders were sagging. "I'm tired..."

"So I notice," Sae remarked dryly. "From what Makoto said, you've had a rather rough day. Why don't you head to bed early?"

Akira gave a nod. "I think I'll do that." With a bow to the two Niijima sisters, he headed up the stairs, moving to his room.

Makoto stared at his retreating form with a face akin to a gaping fish, eyes threatening to pop. His utter lack of concern over the situation was...infuriating and baffling. Infuriating because, given her nature as student council president, he was giving a complete lack of disregard towards his own image, which was somewhat crucial in school. Yes, she had an image as well, seen as a tight-ship running woman, but given the prestige of Shujin, it was natural. Baffled because of his disregard. She would have thought he would be angered or saddened by this turn of events, yet instead, somehow, he just took it in stride. But why? Shouldn't he be raging over it?

"How is he not concerned about this?" she questioned with a sigh, shaking her head. She then looked back at her sister. "By the way, sis...I thought you said you wouldn't be home tonight."

The older woman waved a hand. "One of my co-workers decided to cover for me tonight," she answered. "I could have handled it by myself, but she insisted." Sae gave a tired sigh, pinching the bridge of her nose. "This really is annoying..."

"Tough case?"

"Something along those lines, yeah. So, how was Kurusu-kun's first day at Shujin?"

'Other than us somehow landing in some strange castle with Kamoshida as its king and torturing students, overall good I'd say,' Makoto thought dryly. Upon that line of thinking, though, she realized that there was another matter that needed to be investigated regarding those bizarre circumstances: the students. If they were from Kamoshida's volleyball team...

Then this required some looking into.

TakeYourTime

No sooner had Akira fallen asleep in the comforts of his bed had he awoken to find himself once again in that bizarre place, colored aquamarine blue. "Welcome to the Velvet Room," he heard Igor's voice greet him as he sat up groggily, rubbing his eyes before he turned.

Sure enough, there the bizarre old man and his young assistant, Lavenza, stood in the center of the room, the former with that wide-stretching smile plastered across his face. He got up from the makeshift bed of the cell, and left, entering the circular room. As he did, Lavenza bowed her head. "Welcome back," she greeted him. "It seems you've had quite an experience."

"That's one way of putting it," Akira muttered, rubbing his neck. "So, this place wasn't a dream..."

"If you wish, it could be considered as such," Igor told him pleasantly. "As I said before, it is a place that exists between dream and reality, mind and matter." The old man then leaned forward, a curious glint in his eye. "By the way...I see that it is Arsene who embodies your rebellious will." Akira's eyes widened. Arsene...that's right. It was the name, the identity, of the being that emerged from him. Even now, he still felt its presence inside his body, as well as the elation it brought him. "Hmhmhm...how fitting. It seems you are indeed meant to be a phantom thief."

The frizzy-haired teen frowned. "Phantom...thief?"

"A topic for another time," Lavenza told him sharply. "Regardless, you now have the means to resist the ruins we spoke of to you earlier." Akira turned to him, curious. "The power you have obtained is known as 'Persona.' A power that represents one's truest self, given physical form. In a manner of speaking, it is a mask you wear when facing worldly matters."

Igor continued, "It is also your will of rebellion - the desire to never adhere to the rules placed upon you. However...yours is a unique

power, my boy."

"Unique?" Akira asked. "Unique how?"

"You will come to know, in time," the old man answered enigmatically, much to the boy's continued annoyance. What was up with the cryptic answers with these people? Was it that hard to ask for a straight answer. However, Igor continued, either unaware of his thoughts which obviously showed on his face or simply ignored it. "Do you recall what I told you before in your last visit? That this place is only visited by those who have forged a contract?"

The boy nodded. "Yes, but...I don't remember signing a contract."

"Signing a piece of paper is not necessarily the only way of establishing a contract," the blue-garbed assistant told him, shaking her head. "It can be established through many means. Pursuing a mystery of unknown, chasing after a haunting memory, or facing that you do not understand...there are many ways. Regardless of how you may have done it, a contract has been sealed."

"And thus, you are our guest," Igor told him. Akira thought he saw his grin spread further, threatening to split his face in half. "Therefore, our services will be open to you for when you begin your journey."

"Journey...?"

Rather than answer his question, Igor held up a hand. A soft blue light danced into the air before him. Then, much to his surprise, the light solidified, becoming what appeared to be a key of some kind with a black-and-white face at the bottom. Hesitantly, the boy grabbed the key as it slowly descended. It was practically weightless, and felt smooth, much more so than typical metal.

"This key signifies that you are our guest," Lavenza told him, eyes narrowing at him with the utmost serious. "As our guest, you must uphold the terms of the contract: to take responsibility for any and all actions you make. So long as you adhere to this, we shall assist you in whatever way we can."

Igor chuckled. "I wonder where this power shall take you?" he said, curiosity and intrigue clear. "I can only look forward to what lays in the future for you, Trickster."

"Trickster?" Akira frowned, confused by the name. Why had the man called him that? Before he could ask, he felt his senses becoming overwritten by overwhelming drowsiness. "Mnrgh..."

"The next we meet," Igor's voice echoed as he began to fall back into unconsciousness. "It shall be of your own accord. Until then...farewell."

With those departing words, Akira's eyes rolled to the back of his head, and fell into unconsciousness once more.

TakeYourTime

Akira woke up in his bed, staring at the door that led to his room. As he rose up, leaving the blanket on his body to fall, he let out a tired yawn, scratching the back of his head. "I swear, what is with that weird dream?" he questioned, shaking his head in confusion. He wasn't sure if it was simply the stress from earlier, but the dream about that Velvet Room place and those Igor and Lavenza people were starting to become more bizarre. He winced a bit as he made a move to leave his bed, noting the aching pain in his chest and shoulder. "Guess what happened at school wasn't a dream, either." He then noticed something in his sweat's pocket. Frowning, he looked at the nightstand next to his bed, where his smartphone lay. That meant he didn't sleep with it, but if that was the case, then what was inside his pocket?

He dug inside and grabbed it, noting that it was small. He pulled it out, and opened his palm. His eyes widened, however, when he saw it. "...you gotta be shittin' me!"

It was the key he received in the dream. The key that signified his role as a "guest" of the Velvet Room.

That meant...the dream was real. The fact filled Akira with dread. The mention of ruin was concerning, and while he had previously dismissed it as mere ramblings, this told him that whatever awaited

him was not going to be pleasant. He remembered the strange creatures that appeared in that bizarre castle, the warped Kamoshida who stood before them, the battered and tortured students. Something was not right. He wasn't sure what, but that place must be connected somehow. And this power...Persona...if he awoke it there, and it just so happened to coincide with him becoming a guest of the Velvet Room, then...was it really...just coincidence?

Akira grabbed his phone, unlocking it and looking at the icon that still remained present. He had tried various methods to delete it before, yet it always remained. This app...it must have somehow brought him there, but why? For what purpose?

Well...for now, he would have to put it on hold. He could ponder such curious questions later. After all, him keeping up with the rules of his probation was far more important than investigating some otherworldly matters. With that in mind, he quickly got changed and left his room. To his pleasant surprise, he found Makoto already waiting for him. "Hey," she said, waving. "Did you sleep well?"

"Somewhat," Akira answered. "Still a bit sore."

"I can imagine." Makoto then fell silent for a moment, her face showing that she was having conflicting thoughts before she spoke up again. "Hey...what happened yesterday. At that castle. I know its a bit much, and maybe a bit out of left field, but..."

He already knew what she wanted to say. "You wanted to look into it?"

"Yes." she nodded strongly. "Something about that place bothers me...and it isn't just Kamoshida-sensei's bizarre behavior, or those monsters, either." As he suspected. She was wondering about the students they saw being tortured. He would be lying if he said he wasn't also disinterested as to how students found themselves there without explanation. "I'd like to speak with Sakamoto-kun also, if possible."

"We'll probably run into him either way." Akira shrugged, fastening the belt on his bag. "Anyway, come on. I don't fancy being late on

my second day of school when I've started earning good grace points with my homeroom teacher." Makoto quirked a brow up to her hairline, but then smiled thinly in amusement. The two then made their way out of the house, giving Sae their farewells as they left.

TO BE CONTINUED...

A/N: Here is the ninth chapter of Hoshi to Bokura to, and we're closing in on the awakenings of Ryuji and Makoto! Ex~citing stuff, no? Sorry for the lateness. I was working on other stories, writing a new one, and reading stories. Speaking of which, I recommend Black Fuego's "Persona 5: Trials of the Trickster," which as I learned, was inspired by this fic. The author is awesome as she took a few liberties with it. I won't spoil anything, but its impressive. I've also asked for a bit of help from them regarding a certain something, but I won't say what. Hi~mi~tsu~

So starting off this author's note is the concencus about the use of DLC Personas. Seems like the majority of you guys approve. Actually, one of the DLC personas shall appear in the awakenings of Ryuji and Ann, so that should be something to look forward to. I won't say which one, though. I will also be using the Picaro versions, since they are described in the Compendium as Personas who have become the Trickster's mask.

I'd also like to discuss a few things, in regards to the Confidants/ Social links. Some have been changed considerably, though still keep true to what they are like in the game. I won't say how they've been changed, only that some aspects, such as how they start or the events involving them, have been altered to fit the story.

Third, I'm showing off the poll results so far regarding who "YOU" guys think should be Akira's love interest! In the lead is Makoto with 90 votes, and following behind her is Sae with 61 and Futaba with 48! Struggling to match them are Anne and Hifumi with 42 and 38 votes respectively! And behind the top five girls are Tae, Lavenza, Haru, Sadayo, Chihaya and Ichiko with 31, 30, 12 and 7 votes! Damn...I'll be honest. I wasn't expecting Makoto to be so freaking popular.

Fourth thing in the list is more news than anything...PERSONA 5 IS RECEIVING A FULL ANIME ADAPTATION! No, I kid you not! The news was announced literally yesterday or so, and is being produced by A-1 Studios. I don't see why people are fussing over that, though, especially given that A-1 is known for doing some god DAMN good animes, such as Nanatsu no Taizai, Persona 4 the Golden Animation, Persona Trinity Soul (though no one likes to talk about that), Blue Exorcist, Aldnoah Zero, and Black Butler! Anyway, it is being released in 2018! Be hyped, my peeps!

Alright, that's it for now! Later losers, and I'll see you in the next heist!

Ninth Heist: Infiltration

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The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Since time immemorial...they were known as,

"Tricksters."

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

Ninth Heist: Infiltration

Surprisingly, new rumors had popped up not long after second period began in Akira's class, which was headed by Ushimaru. The man certainly did not like it whenever someone whispered or spoke out of turn, as he made a move to grab a particularly large piece of chalk. Personally speaking, Akira preferred having a strict teacher,

since they kept chatter in the classroom down to a bare minimum. That, and it was fun watching them grill someone, depending on who it was and it wasn't him on the receiving end. However, simply because he ran a tight ship didn't mean the whispers had stopped.

"Did you hear? The transfer student was hanging around Sakamoto the other day!"

"Seriously? Guess troublemakers attract one another."

"I heard he was with the Student Council President, too!"

"You don't think he's forcing her to hang out with him, do you?"

Akira rolled his eyes. Forcing her? Well, in a way, he was, given that she had, more or less, the job of looking after him here at school. That said, though, it was odd how they knew about him being with Ryuji. Were there still a couple of students left behind when they somehow returned after that...bizarre trip? He glanced at Ushimaru before taking out his phone, looking at the app that brought him, Makoto and Ryuji there. He had yet to receive any answers about how it installed on his phone, but after many repeated attempts last night, he knew it was there to stay.

And it just may be used again.

TakeYourTime

Akira never thought his feet would fly off so quickly on their own. He walked out the door on autopilot when he heard Kamoshida's familiar voice. "Are you doing alright, Takamaki?" Frowning, the frizzy-haired teen inched closer, hiding himself around the corner and found the teacher with Takamaki. "You're looking a bit pale. Are you still sick?"

"Y-yeah," she nodded hesitantly. "A bit. I still have to make time for the photoshoot, though. My boss insisted."

Akira quirked an eyebrow. Once again, her tone showed that she wanted nothing to do with Kamoshida...not that he blamed here. He was still having a hard time believing that someone like this was even a school teacher. Something about him was still bothering the

teen, and whatever it was, he knew it had something to do with that bizarre trip in the castle. As he watched the two speak, or rather Ann trying to find a way out of the conversation, Akira felt his head pulse and ache with pain. He cradled his head, swooning somewhat. His vision started to turn double, only rather than finding two hallways, the world was distorted, turning into the halls of the castle.

What...?

"Hey, now... Being a model's fine and dandy, but don't work your pretty little self to the bone." Kamoshida said as Akira shook his head, removing the unpleasant light-headed experience. "If you're still not feeling well, I can take you home. You said something about appendicitis the other day, right?"

Appendicitis? That required going to the hospital. Akira was baffled by how gullible the teacher was, even more so with Takamaki creating such a flimsy lie.

"I planned on going to the hospital, b-but I've been busy lately." Takamaki continued the excuse, fidgeting as she twisted her hair around her pigtail. "Sorry to worry you, sensei." Kamosida gave her a concerned look, moving to touch her. Almost instantly, the girl back-pedaled away with a fearful look in her eye, along with slight traces of disgust. "S-sorry, but I really need to go!" With a swift bow, the foreign-looking girl took off in a fast-walk, all the while leaving Kamoshida by himself.

Unlike before, Kamoshida openly showed his expression of bitter anger. "Tch." With a scowl, he turned and walked away, all the while unaware of Akira watching him from the corner.

With the teacher gone, he removed himself from his hiding place and adjusted his glasses when they threatened to fall. From what he saw, it seemed like Kamoshida had been making advances on the girl. Normally he wouldn't blame him. The girl was quite beautiful...but the advances the man was making, and Takamaki's reaction, were anything but normal. Something was happening. He then recalled what the "king" had mentioned, along with the way he looked at Makoto. Just the mere thought of it caused his heart to clench in anger. Something was definitely wrong. Kamoshida was in

the middle of it...but just what on Earth was happening?

"Yo." Akira turned and found Ryuji coming up from behind him, his hands in his pockets. The teen idly noticed how he seemed to walk in a limp, his leg lower than the others. "Miss Prez told me to come get you." The frizzy-haired teen nodded before he turned back to where Kamoshida left, his unnerved feeling still present. Ryuji noticed this and frowned. "Something up?"

Akira shook his head. "It's nothing." he told him. Right now, it was just that. A feeling. There was no evidence to back it up yet. He then followed Ryuji to the Student Council Room where Makoto was waiting, all the while ignoring the hushed whispers and stares everyone was giving the two.

TakeYourTime

"We've got until the end of lunch before we have to head back," Makoto told the two as they took a seat at the table. Much to the student council president's ire, the blonde had chosen a rather immature posture by slinging an arm over the chair and propping a leg on the table. She gave an aggravated sigh before she pinched her nose. She would ignore it...for now. "At any rate, I did a bit of digging around. Do you recall the students we found back at the castle?"

Ryuji growled. "Hard not to." he said in utter disgust. He engraved the sight in his mind, making sure that he would never forget it. "I recognized a few of the guys, too."

"As did I." Makoto nodded, propping her chin on her hands. "Before classes started and during break, I called up a few of them."

Akira was the first to state the Elephant in the room. "Did you ask them about the castle?"

"Not in the way you think. Rather, I asked them if Kamoshida-sensei was abusing them." Her red eyes burned, almost like fire, as a look of anger formed on her face. "Their reactions and denial told me everything. He's definitely abusing them. While some of those injuries are form practice...many were far too severe to be caused

by falling or being struck by volleyballs."

The black-haired boy shook his head, practically picturing the sight in his mind already. The bastard in a room somewhere, knuckles raw and bloodied while a student laid on the ground, black and blue all over with bruises in the making already forming while the man stared down at them with contempt. Ryuji must have imagined it as well as he let out a roar of anger, banging his fist down on the table. "Dammit!" he shouted. "What the hell! Why is nobody saying anything about this?!"

It was odd, now that Ryuji mentioned it. With so many students being abused, why had Kamoshida not been caught by now? How has he not been arrested? Makoto also seemed perplexed by this as a heavy frown of confusion marred her face while forehead creases made themselves known, a clear sign that she was deep in thought. There must be something they're missing, something crucial. Eventually, the girl sighed. "I can try and ask around more, but I don't think it will be much help. Principal Kobayakawa has always considered Kamoshida-sensei to be his pride and golden goose. Even if we were to bring this up to him with evidence...the worst he would do is suspend Kamoshida-sensei for a few days." The girl bit her lip in anger. "If only there was some way...!"

The three were left in silence. Was the situation...really hopeless? Even now, this sense of wrongness...

There has to be something. Akira thought, struggling to find an answer. *If the faculty is keeping quiet, there has to be another way to get Kamoshida to tell us the truth. If he's really beating the students up like that, there has to be evidence somewhere. If only there was a way to...*

Then a thought came to him. That's right...there was another option. It was a longshot, but...

"...what if we went back to the castle?" he offered, causing the two to look at him. "There's still the students there."

Ryuji's eyes widened as he leaped out of his seat. "Oh yeah, that's right!" he said with a grin. "If we can bust 'em out of that place, they

can expose Kamoshida!"

"What?!" Makoto cried, clearly against the plan. She immediately showed her displeasure by glaring at the two. "Have you two lost your minds?! We nearly got killed back there! Also, we don't know how we can get back there!"

"The app." Akira took out his cell phone, showing the red eye. "If I remember right, when it started up it brought us to that castle. If we use it again, we can go back there."

"That still doesn't change the facts!" Makoto shook her head, slamming her hands on the table. The intensity of her glare, as well as this action, caused Ryuji to jump. "Those...Shadows, or whatever Morgana called them, are dangerous! We only got out because of him and you when you got that strange power! We don't know if its just a one-time deal!"

Akira knew she had a point. There was so much that they couldn't understand. However, that said...

"Can you really leave this alone, Niijima-san?"

The question was enough to render her speechless. The reason for this was because she knew he had her. Yes, even though she wanted to so badly deny any of this and pretend it didn't happen, her nature and position wouldn't allow it. Seeing students being hurt so horribly, and by the actions of a teacher no less, no matter how bizarre the circumstances were the other day, warranted her attention. She could try and put it off however she wanted to, but it could not change the fact that she was worried just as badly as they were. If there was even the slightest chance of Kamoshida's wrongdoings being true as the rumors claimed...

After a minute of silence, she gave a heavy sigh. "...fine." Ryuji smiled widely, pumping a fist while Akira's smile was one of gratitude. "But, if we're serious about this, we should be careful. I wasn't kidding when I said we were nearly killed back there." The conversation was cut short by the ringing of the bell. "We should head back to class. We can head there after school."

The two boys nodded, and left the Student Council room. As they made their way out, though, the blonde delinquent had bumped into a passerby. "Oof!" he grunted as he backpedaled from the sudden collision while the recipent was knocked to the ground, papers and documents falling out of her hands. A second after regaining his bearings, Ryuji panicked. "Ah, crap! Sorry about that!" he said apologetically as he bent down, collecting the documents. "You okay?"

"Y-yes." the girl said as she sat up, offering a gentle smile. "I'm sorry. I should have looked where I was going."

"H-here, let me help you!"

Akira rolled his eyes, amused by Ryuji's flustered nature before he helped out as well. In little time, all the papers were gathered and returned to the girl. "Thank you so much." the girl said, smile still present as she bowed her head. "And again, I'm very sorry. I was so deep in thought I didn't notice someone coming."

"It's fine." Akira told her, waving a hand. He then took a moment to look at her.

She was a year older than him or so, with autumn-burned hair, curly and cut short at the chin and coffee brown eyes. Rather than a blazer with a tie or bow, she wore a baggy pink sweater over it with a rather large turtleneck and puffy short-sleeves. Underneath it was a white shirt, and below was the school's trademark black and red skirt. Underneath that were white tights with black flower patterns and black Mary Jane shoes.

The girl seemed to notice his stare, as she cocked her head in confusion. "Is there something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing." he said, quickly avoiding her gaze. "Are you a senior, by any chance?"

The girl nodded. "Yes. You two must be second-years, am I correct?"

"Yep." Ryuji nodded. "And again, sorry for bumping into you earlier."

"I've told you before, it's nothing!" the girl giggled. She then looked at the clock hanging on a hallway wall nearby, and her eyes widened. "Oh no, class is going to start soon!" She turned back to the two boys, and bowed her head deeply. "E-excuse me!" The two parted for her to move, and she was off like a bullet, racing down the halls.

As Ryuji watched her leave, he couldn't help but chuckle. "Talk about cute." he said before he adopted a puzzled expression. "You know...I think I've seen her before." He gave the idea some thought, but then shook his head. "Eh, whatever. C'mon, let's head to class before the teach chews us out. Who do you have?"

"Ms. Kawakami."

"Lucky. I've got Ushimaru."

TakeYourTime

School ended much quicker than the classes Akira and Ryuji were forced to attend. After meeting up at the Student Council Room with Makoto, they made their way to the front gate, opposing the alleyway shown off just ahead. "Remind me again," Ryuji said in confusion. "Why are we in some alley? No offense, Prez, but if people saw us here, I'm pretty sure people are gonna be talking about you as bad as me and this guy here, if the whispers I keep hearing are any indication." Curious, the teen then turned to Akira with an eyebrow at his hairline. "Speaking of which...who did you piss off to get your record spread?"

"We've been trying to figure that out." Makoto said. "As for why we're in the alleyway, the school rooftop is closed off ever since an accident two years ago. We can't use that, and even if we did, I don't want to run the risk of someone, especially a teacher, catching us in the act."

Akira nodded at the logic. "It would be hard to explain how students mysteriously vanish into some alternate dimension."

"Exactly." Makoto nodded before she smiled. "But thank you for the concern, Sakamoto-kun."

"Ah, sheesh. Just call me Ryuji." the blonde insisted. "Never was one for formality."

"Very well." Makoto agreed. "However, in that case, please call me Makoto." She then leveled a look at Akira. "Same to you, Akira. You don't have to be so formal." A giggle then escaped her. "If there's anyone you should be formal to, it's Sis."

Well, there was no denying that, especially since she was both his legal guardian and probation officer. Speaking of that, he was still confused how a prosecutor could double as a troublesome kid's warden, especially given how stressful her job could be at times. Regardless, he smiled and nodded.

"Good. Now then...I'll just ask one more time." Makoto's red eyes hardened in concern, staring at the two boys as she folded her arms. Any lesser man with weak resolve would have crumbled, but they remained firm. "Are you guys sure about this? We got out thanks to Morgana. We may not be so lucky next time."

"We already know that, Makoto-senpai." Ryuji said, already becoming used to referring her by first name now with a steely look present. "Can't turn away from this." A dark look cross his eyes as he grit his teeth. "Especially not when that bastard is involved."

Akira frowned heavily, looking at Ryuji in concern. He still didn't know what sort of problem the blonde delinquent had with the teacher, but regardless, he also gave a determined nod. Makoto gave a sigh, pinching her nose. She knew she would regret this, but for now...they needed answers. She turned to the frizzy-haired teen and gave a nod. He took out his phone and opened up the app. To his surprise, as it opened, a sidebar covered the left side of the screen, showing a few options. Among them was [SEARCH] and [HISTORY].

He clicked on [HISTORY], going by the hunch that [SEARCH] had probably been opened by accident somehow while he was in the process of deleting it before he encountered Ryuji. The sidebar extended further, and found an item of interest.

{KAMOSHIDA'S PALACE}

'Could that be what that place is called? he thought before shrugging and tapping it. Only moments later did the voice of what he assumed was the navigation app speaking.

[Beginning entry.]

Moments later, a familiar sense of distortion overlapped with reality. Makoto and Ryuji stared at their surroundings in shock as they watched as the world morphed and twisted around as black and red ripples overlapped with reality, warping the school. While the alleyway and the street remained normal, the sky became overcast and dark with black clouds threatening to rain down on them. Shujin Academy, however, was left in an entirely new shape - a state that they easily recognized.

The castle.

"Holy shit!" Ryuji exclaimed with large eyes of disbelief. "It actually worked?!"

Makoto, like Ryuji, was stunned to see the incredible change. "Unbelievable..." she whispered in awe. The group cautiously walked into the castle courtyard, right where large gates, no doubt the front entrance, resided. "To think that a phone app was capable of this."

"No shit!" the vulgar student said, still amazed. "B-but how the hell does it work?! I mean, that can't be normal!"

"Ryuji-kun!" Makoto hissed. "Pipe down! You want us to get caught and killed?!" Ryuji paled, instantly realizing his mistake and looking around. Thankfully, there was no one around. Either no one heard him yelling, or no one was around. Akira hoped it was the later, though he had a feeling it wouldn't be so simple. "Look, we just need to get inside and free the students here." she reminded him. "After that, we get out of here. At the very least, find evidence of what Kamoshida is doing."

"R-right." Ryuji nodded his head, lowering his voice. "Sorry." He looked back at the castle, and glared at it. "Still...talk about bad taste. Man, how is this even possible?"

"If you ever find out, please tell me." Makoto asked him before she turned to Akira. She opened her mouth, likely to offer some kind of advice or to remind him to not be reckless, only to stop as her eyes widen. "K-Kurusu-kun, your clothes!"

Akira looked down. To his surprise, he was back in the clothes from when he awakened to the power Igor called Persona: black trench coat, a gray-collared shirt with black trousers, boots pressed against the foothold beneath him, and red gloves at his hands. His hand moved up to his face, feeling the white avian mask that hid the upper half of his face. He felt the presence in the back of his mind pulsate, as if like a beating heart, as it had been the day he first felt it. However, in this bizarre place, it seemed much stronger, as if it could only truly thrive here.

"Oh yeah," Ryuji recalled. "You wore those last time too." His eyes then widened. "Wait, does that mean you can summon that weird thing again?!"

Akira closed his eyes, grasping the mask. He recalled the feeling of elation from when he first removed it, how the shackles that bounded him for so long becoming undone and shattering apart, link by link. As he remembered that feeling, so too did the rush of power. As a result, he felt the mask become wreathed in blue flames, and the presence in the back of his mind answer his summons. Behind him was the faint silhouette of Arsene, bearing his menacing flaming grin. The shadow of the Persona intimidated the two, so he cut off the flow of power. As a result, the mask regained its physical form, and the black shadow of Arsene vanished into him.

"...dude?" Ryuji looked at him with pleading eyes. " *Never* do that again."

Makoto seemed to share a similar look, though hers was less of fear and more of curiosity and intrigue. "So you still have that power." she said, somewhat in relief. "Good. It should helps if we get into a fight." That said, however, her eyes narrowed in concern. "Just...don't push yourself, okay?"

"...I will." he promised before he turned. "Let's go. If I remember right, we left through a vent in the wall. Assuming the guards in this

castle haven't found it yet, we can use that to sneak in."

The two nodded and followed his lead. Sure enough, their escape route from last time was still there. Akira went in first, in spite of the protests the two gave him. He reasoned that if he had the ability to fight, he should see if the coast was clear. They were still reluctant, but they accepted his logic. Ryuji followed, squeezing through the tight fit before he he landed on the ground, hopping down from the bookshelf. Makoto was the last, though Akira helped her down by catching her and setting her down gently. "A gentleman," she hummed in approval before they looked around. "Still the same. If memory serves, that dungeon should be on the corridor to the right of the ballroom."

"Well, let's hope there aren't any knights there to catch us." Ryuji said. "Like you said, in and out, right?"

Makoto nodded. The three then left the room, entering the hallway. As they moved about, Akira kept a close eye out for any guards, though strangely, as he did, he felt an odd sensation. For a moment, the world seemed to shimmer out, outlined by white lines. He quickly shook his head, wondering if it was perhaps a side-effect of this new power. As they reached the ballroom, he grew suspicious, finding no guard present whatsoever.

Unfortunately, that line of thinking was cut off when they heard the sounds of screaming, emanating from the corridor. Hearing this, Ryuji growled in rage. Were it not for Makoto, who held him by the shoulder and offered him a determined glare of her own, he would have run off.

"Don't worry." she told him. "We'll save them." Her eyes then hardened once more, this time with a threatening edge. "And make Kamoshida pay."

The blonde's eyes widened, but then bowed his head in gratitude. "...thanks, senpai." With that, the three set off.

All the while, unaware of blue eyes watching them intently. Moments later, a black shadow darted off with the intention of following them.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Tenth Heist: Haunting Truth

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Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

Tenth Heist: Haunting Truth

Traversing the castle had been slightly less easier than Akira had anticipated. The path had been the same, though he soon discovered why there weren't any guards. Their path was blocked by several black-armored soldiers bearing aqua-blue masks, prancing and patrolling about.

"Crap!" Ryuji panicked as they ducked behind nearby cover, fleeing into a nearby stack of crates. Crouching down to avoid being seen, the blonde delinquent slowly poked his head out, watching the soldiers. "The hell? I don't think there was this many before!"

"We must have pissed off Kamoshida something serious." Akira remarked. "It'll be a pain to get past them."

"No shit." Ryuji remarked, noting the numbers. As he looked around for a way they could maneuver around the Shadows, he noticed the many cells lining up the pathways. Some already had occupants, though their forms were hard to discern. Compared to the ones they first saw, these prisoners wore rags with shackles binding their wrists and ankles while some kind of iron mask was placed over their faces. The mere sight was enough to church his stomach the wrong way. "Jesus...the eff is Kamoshida doing in this castle?"

Makoto shook her head. "I have no idea." she said, unable to find an answer to his question. She then presented a more curious, and important one to the growing pile. "On the subject...are we sure that was even Kamoshida-sensei?"

"How do you mean?" Akira asked, looking over his shoulder. He then remembered his first encounter with the teacher in this bizarre place - the glowing yellow eyes, clouded with malice and lust, the plain-faced show of emotion without a shred of the man at school present. Though her question was strange, he knew what she was getting at. Something about the Kamoshida in this castle was...disturbing.

Ryuji seemed to realize this, too, as his eyebrows knitted together. "A-actually, now that you mention it..."

"INTRUDER!"

The three students' bodies froze, immediately put on alert as a black knight barreled his way in, distorted voice laced with panic. The others noticed this commotion and rallied to him. ***"What's the matter?"*** one of them asked. ***"What's happening?!"***

"It's that damned intruder from before!" the newcomer informed

urgently. ***"We found him in the main hall! He's heading this way!"***

"What?!" another snarled. ***"Troublesome nuisance!"*** The knight then turned to his comrades. ***"Everyone, let's go! We'll cut him off at the entrance!"***

With a chorus of cheers, the knights fled into one of the pathways, vanishing from sight. As Akira looked around, in case any knights stayed behind, he looked back to his friends. "We're good." he informed them, stepping out from their hiding place. Sighing in relief, Ryuji and Makoto also stepped out, looking at where the knights fled. "I guess we're not the only ones who came here."

"Could it be Morgana?" Makoto inquired, putting a hand on her chin. "He's the only person I can think of who might have a reason for being here. That, and he has the same power you do."

Ryuji scratched the back of his head. "I'm still confusing on that whole thing." he said, somewhat irritated by the lack of explanation. "What's this 'Persona' thing about anyway?" After a moment, he shook his head fiercely and then looked back at Akira. "Actually, you know what? Forget I asked. Come on. Let's find that 'Training Hall of Love' place we found before."

"Agreed." the Student Council President said in approval, pleased to see that the former athlete was taking her advice to heart. "Someone is giving us a distraction, so let's use it." The boys didn't argue, and instead ran down the now vacant paths. As they did, they looked at the cells, blanching at the depressing sights.

So horrible. Makoto thought, trying her best not to look. They made a sharp turn around the bend, coming close to the spiral staircase leading down to the next level. *How could anyone do this...?*

She couldn't comprehend it in the slightest. Before, when she was still a second-year, she had thought Suguru Kamoshida to be something of an upstanding individual, and believed what Kobayakawa envisioned - a star for Shujin to prosper. Under his guidance, the volleyball team was advancing, and soon they would

be able to head to the nationals. It was to be expected, given that the man was a graduate of Shujin himself. However, after a while, unsavory rumors began to spread. Rumors that unnerved her. Thanks to those rumors, she also began to notice things that she hadn't before.

Male members of the volleyball team having injuries too severe to be caused by practice.

Female members suddenly becoming reclusive and hesitant compared to their usual selves, especially in the presence of their coach.

There was also the incident regarding the track team as well. From what she learned, the training had suddenly become much more harsh, and a rumor regarding Ryuji's family situation somehow spread, leading to an unprovoked attack on Kamoshida that resulted in self-defense. Self-defense that ended with his leg being broken, and ending his track career.

Why she hadn't noticed any of this before, she didn't know. It didn't change the fact that all of this happened when she was supposed to be looking out for the student body as her position as Student Council President. She felt... *useless* .

She **hated** feeling useless.

Eventually, they reached the end of the road. The entrance to the staircase leading downward was in sight. The problem was a steel gate barring the way. Ryuji tried to push it open, only to meet resistance. "Dammit!" he swore as he tried once more, only to fail. "Locked!" He turned back to the ground, a scowl on his face. "We're gonna have to find another way!"

"That, or we try finding a key." Akira suggested before frowning. "Then again...knowing our luck, we'll probably be-"

"There you bastards are!" The three teens whirled around, seeing a knight emerge from a nearby passageway. Its burning red eyes bore deeply into them as familiar black and red fluid began to seep from the openings in its body, and its form trembling. Its body then

exploded, and the black and red goop formed into a new shape.

Strangely, in spite of possessing a male voice, the figure that formed from the gunk was female. It lacked any feet visible to them, wearing a bright red dress with a white cap, invoking the image of some sort of maid. Its skin was light green, and flowing down past the shoulders was hair of a much darker shade. Even stranger still was, in spite of the killing intent the Shadow radiated, it bore a gentle smile.

"Thieves who have come to take Lord Kamoshida's Treasure shall not be allowed to leave this place alive!" the Shadow announced as it brought its hands close together. A flicker of sparks danced in between its palms before it sparked into a ball of flame, as big as a softball, before sending it flying at the teens.

Ryuji's eyes widened in panic. "OH, SHIT!" he cried before he shielded Makoto from the oncoming blast. Akira scowled as his mask erupted into blue flames, a hand over his face. As the ball of flame reached him, it suddenly exploded, engulfing the three in an inferno. The Shadow's gentle smile turned cruel, but then faded as the plume of smoke and flames were blown away, courtesy of a demonic red figure with a flaming grin and black wings.

"Take her down, Arsene!" Akira shouted.

The Persona of the Fool Arcana obeyed its master's command, shooting forward with a claw outstretched. Quickly, the Shadow danced away and leaving it to impale the wall. Brick and concrete shattered with ease, obliterated by the sharp claws. Arsene was quick to zero in on its target and shuttled forward, flapping its wings and taking to the air, black and red energy dancing in its claws. It then dragged the empowered claws through the wall as it charged at the Shadow, who gathered another ball of flames. Once within range, Arsene let the cursed power of Eiha loose, allowing it to rip a path through the wall in its pursuit and forming into a demonic head hellbent on consuming the lovely being. The Shadow launched the fireball at it, creating a giant blast of flames and smoke.

A shockwave passed through, nearly sending Ryuji and Makoto the ground. Akira, however, stood his ground as his gray eyes, steely

and fierce - a total contrast to how he usually was as the calm and quiet-mannered transfer student the students had seen him as in spite of the harsh rumor mill running around. He felt something pulsate through his being, almost like a resonance of some kind with the Persona. Soon, this pulse grew stronger. With a sudden gust of wind from within the cloud of smoke, Arsene blew it away, revealing him perfectly fine.

The Shadow scowled as it floated back, evading a kick that would have severed its head from its shoulders before it gathered another fireball in its grasp. Unlike last time, however, it directed the sphere of flames upwards, sending it straight up to the ceiling. As a result of the blast, rocks of debris came falling down. Immediately, Arsene backed away, lest it be crushed by the giant pieces of rock. It gathered the black and red energy in its hands again, though it soon found the process halted when the Shadow revealed something else in its bag of tricks. Spreading its arms out, tiny balls of flame danced around it, six in all and forming into a circle. As soon as it slammed its hands togethers, the tiny fireballs launched themselves at Arsene.

The first two were dodged with little effort. Arsene cocked its head to the side and letting it explode against the wall on the opposite path to the three teens before slashing at the second with its heels. The third, however, exploded on its wing, causing blue flames to burn at the exact spot. The fourth struck Arsene in the shoulder, and the fifth and sixth dead center in the chest. In each spot, blue flames burned, as if to represent the damage - damage Akira received as well. He let out a cry of pain, feeling a sensation akin to a firecracker exploding against exposed skin. The intensity behind the pain left him to fall to his knees, grasping his chest as he felt his chest ache in pain. His breath became labored, and his eyes clouded. He could vaguely hear the sound of his friends calling out to him in concern.

Sadly, the Shadow gave him no time to rest as it created a fireball in its hands, and sent it straight at Arsene. It exploded straight into its chest, causing even greater flames to burn on its body. The force of the explosion also sent it smacking straight against the steel bars apart of the gate, causing it to shudder. Akira let out another cry of pain as he was swept off his feet, finding his back striking harshly

against the bars. Spit flew out of his mouth from the impact, chest screaming in pain. Unlike before, it felt he was just struck with a giant red-hot hammer right in the center of his chest. His mind was beginning to feel cloudy as well. Arsene, sluggish, tried to pry itself off the bars before it found a pair of slender hands wrap around its neck.

"Au-!" Akira gasped, his hands suddenly going to his throat. He felt something wrapping around his neck. Something cold, vile... It was binding his windpipes. He couldn't breathe. He was starting to feel the loss of oxygen rushing through his body. His lungs hammered in his body, begging to try and give him sustenance, but the unseen hands around his neck wouldn't allow it. "Agh-!"

"Kurusu-kun?!" Makoto cried, rushing to his side and grabbing his shoulders. "Kurusu-kun, what's wrong?!"

Ryuji stared at his friend in horror, watching as his face was starting to grow blue. *W-what the hell's going on here?!* he thought, too shocked to understand what was happening. *Why's he freaking out all of a sudden?! And why is he looking like he's being stran...gled...?!* His brown eyes widened in realization, looking at the winged form of Arsene as it struggled to pry the hands of the Shadow off of its neck as its form was beginning to become engulfed in azure flames, flames that were beginning to dim in color. It came to him right then.

Any damage that winged thing suffered...Akira also felt?!

Son of a bitch! he cried in anger, gritting his teeth as he looked around for something - ANYTHING! - to use. He wasn't going to let this happen. He wasn't about to let Akira die from something like this dammit! He soon found a large piece of rock, remnants from the ceiling from the earlier explosion, and grabbed it. "Hey, you green bitch!" he shouted at the Shadow, earning its attention as it craned its head at him. He then threw the rock at it, striking it in the forehead. It recoiled from the blunt attack, letting out a small pained cry. Black fluid began to leak from its forehead as it looked back at him through closed eyes, a snarl forming on its lips.

"Filthy wretch!" it snarled as it released one hand from its grasp on

Arsene's neck, aiming its palm at Ryuji. Makoto's eyes widened in panic and horror as flames began to form in her palm. Ryuji, however, stood his ground and leveled a glare at it. The gesture was clear. He was practically begging it to shoot one at him. Taunting it even! The Shadow felt infuriated, rage bubbling in its chest as it readied an Agi, ready to reduce this pathetic whelp to cinders.

However, in that one moment of distraction, as Akira felt his connection with his Persona grow dimmer, he scowled heavily, biting the inside of his cheek. Blood leaked through the broken, tender skin. Pain registered in his mind, piercing through the growing haze. In that one moment, Arsene's dim body sprung to life as its flaming eyes and mouth burned even darker with karmic retribution in mind. It grabbed the hand on its neck, claws piercing into the skin while its other hand suddenly latched itself to its face. The action took the Shadow off guard, though it soon found itself screaming in pain as one of the Persona's sharp digits suddenly impale itself through its eye socket. A cry of pain ripped from its throat as it tried to remove the hand. With both hands now occupied with trying to remove Arsene's hand from its being, Akira found himself regaining his breath. Panting, a surge of rage formed in his heart.

Suddenly, his eyes burned crimson red as he found himself screaming. "Arsene!"

The Persona felt the newfound surge of strength in its other self, and its flaming grin turned wicked. It dug its claws in deeper into the Shadow's flesh, seeping further into the skin before dragging it out, creating a massive scar on the otherwise beautiful face the being sported. Black and red fluids spewed out of its now mangled face, clutching the mug as it screamed out of pain and grief. With opportunity now present, it suddenly lunged forward reared back a claw, the same writhing mass of black and red energy gathering before lacing around the sharp tips of its claws. It then swung its hand, ripping straight through the Shadow's chest and reducing it to a mess of gore. The goo that made up its being spewed out like a geyser before it fell limp, falling into the stream of water. Moments later, the stream became tinted with black and red.

With the opposition disposed of, Arsene's form flickered into azure

flames before disappearing. The white mask then returned on Akira's features. Exhaustion hit him like a freight train as he found himself slumping against the balls that held him. "Kurusu-kun!" Makoto cried as she wrapped an arm around his torso, preventing him from falling to the floor in a heap. Her face was marred with panic and fear. After seeing that vicious display earlier, and how he was seemingly suffering, she had more than every right to be worried over his wellbeing. "A-are you okay?!"

"Y-yeah." he wheezed, hacking up a lung as his lungs went back to work, trying to function properly after nearly suffocating. "I-I'm fine." He winced in pain, however, feeling the full effects of the damage Arsene suffered. It seems his thoughts from the previous day when he encountered the Shadows was correct after all. Any damage his Persona takes, he feels as well. His hand went to his throat, recalling how the Shadow tried to strangle the life out of it earlier, and him in turn. If this was what the battles ahead of him were like...he was not looking forward to it. "J-just...just give me a second."

Ryuji let out a sigh of relief, running a hand through his short blonde hair. He could feel his knees shaking from the killing intent that damned Shadow as radiating earlier. His mind was now processing what he had just attempted, and found himself stunned. He knew he was an idiot, but he didn't think he was THAT idiotic. Even still, he couldn't let Akira get himself killed. "Thank god you're okay, man." he said, moving over to help Akira as well. He slung one of his arms over his shoulder, hoisting him up. "Crap, you scared the shit out of us back there."

"S-sorry..."

Makoto sniffled, wiping away what she felt was the onset of a tear forming if the wet feeling brushing up against her eye was any indication. "You should be."

"Aw, look at what you did." the former athlete chuckled softly, trying his best to lighten up the mood. "You've gone and made Makoto-senpai cry!"

Akira let out a pained laugh, wincing from how his ribs seemed to

disagree with it. "Sorry...I'll apologize properly when we get out of here." he promised. "First things first...let's get to those prisoners."

"H-how?" Makoto asked. "The door's still locked. And all of that commotion just now is bound to attract more guards!"

The boys knew she was right. With all the noise that was practically being blared out like a stereo on full blast, there was no way a guard didn't hear that. Akira debated whether or not he should call on Arsene again, but he felt too damned exhausted. The fog in his mind was still making it difficult to think. As the group pondered their options, Ryuji noticed something glimmering out of the corner of his head. "Hey." he called, earning their attention. "The hell's that?" Makoto looked at what he saw. There was something shining, no doubt a reflection of something, stuck against one of the bars. Gently letting Ryuji handle the weight of the frizzy-haired teen, she walked over to the edge of the aquaduct and bent down, grabbing the object.

Her eyes widened, however, when she held it up in her hand to examine it. "A key...?"

"Seriously?!" Ryuji gawked, completely shocked. What were the odds of finding it so close to them? "Wait, was it from that monster from earlier?!"

"If so," Akira grunted. "Then let's hurry. We can't stay here for long."

Nobody was willing to put that to the test. Makoto quickly inserted the key into the lock on the gate. A loud 'click' could be heard, and the gate swung open. "Yes!" Ryuji cheered. "Moving on!" Quickly, they made their way over to the staircase, descending downward.

TakeYourTime

In spite of Makoto's protests, Akira had found some strength returning to him. He insisted that he was capable of walking on his own now, however much his body protested in retaliation with pain shooting through his body. Even so, he powered on, unwilling to allow himself to let the two worry about him further. Makoto shot him a worried glance every now and then, no doubt aware of that he was

not in good shape yet, but she seemed to have given up trying to convince him otherwise.

Soon, they returned to the 'Training Hall of Love.' Glancing at each other, nodding, they pushed open the doors, entering the room. Unlike before, there were less people being tortured. It didn't make the sight any easier to look at, however. It was hard to watch as students were left trapped in cages, being severely bruised and beaten in horrific ways.

"Okay!" Ryuji said hotly as he looked at Makoto and Akira. "We just gotta bust these guys out of here! After that, we can expose Kamoshida for all of this bullshit!"

Akira gave a nod. He then went over to one of the cages, looking for an unlocking mechanism or a lock of some kind. If need be, he would smash it open with Arsene. Makoto and Ryuji went over to one of the other cages, also looking for a way to pop them open. In the middle of his search, Akira noticed that one of the trapped students was staring at him bizarrely. Strangely, the boy seemed familiar to Akira, though he couldn't quite place it.

"What are you doing? the student asked as he limped over, cradling a bruised arm. "Who...are you?"

"A friend." the masked boy promised. "I'm here to get you out of here."

The boy's eyes widened in surprise, but soon it faded into forlorn as a bitter smile touched his lips, turning away. "Sorry, but...it won't work." Akira was taken aback by the defeated expression on the boy's face. Soon, however, he remembered why this boy looked so familiar. He was the student he ran into in the hallway on his first day at Shujin when he asked for direction to the Student Council room. "We can't leave this place. Even if we did...the King would just punish us even harder."

"But you can expose him." Akira persisted. "You all can."

"We can't defy the king." the defeated boy continued on, shaking his head. "It's impossible." Saying his piece, he returned to his place at

the back of the room, slumping down in a heap.

Akira frowned, pulling away from the cage. He didn't understand...what was going on? Surely, these people must have thought about escaping before. Why was it so hard to believe? As he studied their features, he suddenly noticed something...bizarre about them. Leaning closer, he fuddled his brow, straining his eyes as he studied their faces. Their eyes seemed to be incredibly hollow and lifeless. Moreso than the typical dead-to-the-world look. Their skin was pale as if they hadn't been out in the sun for so long, their bodies incredibly thin as if malnourished.

But...that didn't make any sense. How could that be? When he saw the boy in the hall yesterday, he didn't even look the least bit deprived of food or sunlight. With the exception of the bruises, he seemed to be perfectly healthy.

Then, suddenly, as if responding to some sort of doubt in his heart, a pulse echoed through his being. A clarity washed over him, the sense of wrongness in the world around him fading for the just the tiniest moment. In it, Akira's eyes widened to the size of dinner plates. He took a shaky step back, moving away from the cage.

It can't be... A-are they...?

"Looks like you realized it." a familiar boyish voice announced. Turning his head, he found Morgana standing behind him, large blue eyes staring up at him with a knowing look while his arms were crossed over his chest. "I saw you guys running here. Doesn't take a genius to know why you came back to the one place where that Kamoshida bastard would tighten security."

So he and Makoto were correct. It was Morgana who provided them with the means of escape. Even still, it did little to lessen the feeling of dread in his heart as he turned back to the lifeless...doll-like prisoners, trapped behind the bars that would forever prevent him from reaching them.

"Morgana...are these people?"

"I'm afraid so." Morgana said, speaking the words that caused his

heart to sink. "These people... *aren't real* ."

TO BE CONTINUED...

Persona Compendium:

Silky - Priestess: [A house faerie of England and Scotland. She carries out household chores while everyone sleeps and is a welcome spirit. It is said you can hear her silk skirts rustle as she works. However, she will kill anyone who tries to cause harm to the family she protects.]

A/N: Okay...be honest. Are you people pissed about me not updating this story frequently? Is that why I didn't get as many reviews last time? I mean, don't get me wrong, favorites and follows are a clear indicator that I'm doing something right, but reviews have a greater impact since people tell me their thoughts about what I'm writing.

I promise I'll update more, so please, review to your hearts content! Reviews keep me going like any other author! If you do, I promise I'll update more frequently! I swear! So please!

PLEASE?!

Wow...what a pathetic guy, am I right? Anyway, lack of reviews aside, we're getting close to the awakenings of Makoto and Ryuji, as well as a special surprise for a few people! Hopefully, though, this sack of shit can update quicker!

Welp, that's pretty much it. What a lame author's note.

Later, losers, and we'll see you guys next heist.

11th Heist: Rebellious Once More

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Since time immemorial...they were known as,

"Tricksters."

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

11th Heist: Rebellious Once More

"The hell do you mean they ain't real?!"

After Morgana's appearance, the cat-like creature had dragged them away, taking refuge in a room that appeared to be some sort of warehouse of some kind, given the crates and barrels scattered

about. The individual in question was sitting atop one of the barrels with his arms folded, leveling his large blue eyes in a heated glare at Ryuji, who looked positively miffed by what he was just told. "Pipe down, will you?!" Morgana hissed. "You want the Shadows to figure out we're here or something?!"

"Not until you explain what the eff you mean about those guys!" Ryuji snarled, marching up to the cat-like creature, tempted to grab it by the neck. "How, exactly, are they not real?!"

Makoto walked up to the former athlete, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Calm down." she told him sternly, eyes narrowing. "I'm sure Morgana has a good explanation." She turned to Morgana, who smiled back in appreciation, nodding before he cleared his throat.

"Alright, first things first. I'm sure you're wondering about this place, right?" he asked. The three students gave a collective nod. "This place - or rather, *world* I should say - is called the Metaverse. A reality created by the thoughts and feelings of the people in the real world. A giant world made up of people's inner thoughts and desires. In other words, one giant dream land. This castle we're in?" He gestured to the room, or rather the entirety of the castle that they were inside of. "This place is a Palace. Think of it as a secluded island in the Metaverse, created by twisted desires."

Ryuji stared at the cat, face flat before he cocked his head. "...what?!" he said, understanding none of this. "W-what the hell does that mean? Can't you, I dunno, give us a dumbed down version?!"

Morgana groaned. "You really are an idiot, aren't you?" he said in exasperation, causing Ryuji to bristle in anger. "Okay, fine. Let me simplify it for you. The Metaverse is a world made up of people's mental perceptions in real life. For example, let's say someone in real life envisioned his workplace to be a sanctuary from the hardships he has to face outside of it. In the Metaverse, his workplace would be like a church or warehouse."

"Mental perception?" Makoto repeated, closing her eyes in thought as she put a hand to her chin. After a moment, her eyes widened and looked at the cat-like creature. "You mean... *cognition* ?"

Morgana grinned. "Ooh, you catch on fast."

"What?" Ryuji growled, scratching the back of his head. "Hey, prez, if you get it, can't you explain it?"

Akira sighed, shaking his head as he palmed his forehead. As much as he hated to admit it, the blonde really was mostly muscle and hardly any brain. "Cognition is the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses. This castle of Kamoshida's is pretty much the best example possible."

"How do you mean?"

"Ryuji, think back to yesterday. What did you think Kamoshida was and how he treated the school?"

"Uh..." Ryuji frowned, thinking back to when he first met the frizzy-haired teen. It was hard to forget that meeting, considering he got thrown headfirst with him and Makoto into this weird-ass place. He found Takamaki talking with Kamoshida, though she was obviously not wanting to be near him whatsoever. He didn't blame her, though he wished he knew why she even continued to hang around him if she didn't like 'em. They had lost touch ever since middle school came to an end, and they each focused on their respective goals. Thinking back to his first meeting, he remembered how he called the man a perverted teacher, which wasn't far off the mark in his opinion, and-

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"W-wait a sec." Ryuji held up his hands, eyes wide. "Y-you're sayin'...this whole castle...THIS is how Kamoshida sees the school?!"

Morgana nodded grimly. "That's right." he said. "This castle was born from his twisted desires. To him, your school is his castle...and he is its king."

Ryuji scowled heavily, anger rising in his chest as he turned away from the group and slammed his foot into one of the nearby barrels,

knocking it over. "Dammit!" he roared, face showing naught by livid fury. "That fucking bastard!"

"Ryuji..." Makoto whispered, eyes narrowed in concern.

Morgana and Akira watched as the blonde radiate in anger. Neither understood why he seemed to hate Kamoshida so much, but the latter had a good idea. He remembered their first visit to the 'Training Hall of Love.' The Track Team...had Kamoshida done something? And was what he was doing to the Volleyball team just as bad? Just what on Earth happened to Ryuji back then? The more he thought about it, the more confused he grew. He soon gave a heavy sigh, shaking his head. If the blonde wanted to talk about it, it would be of his own volition. Pushing the thoughts aside for now, he turned to Morgana.

"So, those students back at the Training Hall." he said, earning the two's attention. "Were they also apart of the Metaverse?"

"Yup. You catch on quick." Morgana nodded, hopping down from the barrel. Landing on the ground, he looked up at Akira with a smile. "They're most likely cognitions of how Kamoshida views his students." He paused briefly before his eyes darkened. "At least, the male ones anyway."

Male ones? Akira noticed, frowning. He felt a cold dread wrapping around his heart. Immediately, he pushed those dark thoughts out of his mind. He gave an annoyed sigh as he crossed his arms. "Then how do we prove Kamoshida's abusing his team?" he asked, irritated. The reason they came to this castle was to find proof that Kamoshida was physically abusing members of the volleyball team. If these were just mental perceptions, that meant they were apart of this world, unable to leave it. Not only that, but the idea of a world based on cognition being used as 'evidence' was laughable. "There has to be a way."

There was a curious glimmer in Morgana's eyes, hearing this. "Proof...?" he whispered, tilting his head. If they came here looking for proof, then he had just the way to make Kamoshida fall for his crimes. That said, though, he wasn't quite sure about these people yet. He could tell that the frizzy-haired one, Akira, certainly had

potential. There was a spark in those eyes, along with determination and will. The red-eyed girl would probably be the first to voice her opposition to the idea, and as for the blonde monkey...yeah, he was still unsure, but he at least looked like he wanted to get some payback. After giving the matter more thought, he gave a nod and addressed the group of students. "Well, I do have one idea as to how to get your proof."

They rounded on him instantly, eyes wide. "You do?" Makoto whispered in surprise. "H-how?"

"First things first. We need to get out of here." Morgana said as he walked past Ryuji, pushing open the wooden door. His eyes narrowed as he peeked out, looking for any Shadows. "If we stay here any longer, we run the risk of being caught by guards." He huffed his chest as he pounded a paw against it. "Phantom Thief Rule #3! *You must never be caught by security* !"

"P-phantom thief?" Makoto sweatdropped. She had no idea what on Earth the cat was thinking, but she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. They followed Morgana out, trailing behind him as they made their way through the passageway while keeping an eye out for any Shadows roaming about. She looked back at Akira, who seemed to have regained more strength now that he had more time to rest. Even still, she couldn't help but feel worried. It was definitely apparent that he and Morgana were the only ones capable of fighting against the Shadows.

Once more, she felt so useless. Here she was, standing with them, and she couldn't do anything. Even Ryuji, in spite of his liability with his injured leg, had done so much more by standing up to the Shadow that had threatened Akira's life only moments ago, whereas all she could do was hover over him like some kind of worried mother. She hated this stupid feeling. She could have done something - anything - to try and help them, but the options seemed so far out of reach or was just hidden out of plain sight. No matter how hard she looked, she couldn't find the answer. Frustration rose up her throat alongside anger and self-loathing.

Just what good was she...?

The group eventually reached the main hall, exiting the passageway in a rush. Unfortunately, however, a familiar scene from yesterday played out all over again as black knights emerged from the surroundings, barring their escape route. "Aw shit, this crap again?!" Ryuji said in anger as he and Makoto stood back while Morgana and Akira readied themselves to break on through. As the frizzy-haired teen held a hand over his face, ready to call on his Persona while Morgana's eyes shined brilliantly, wind picking up around him, a few guards stepped away, allowing a familiar figure to step forward in view.

"Honestly, what a nuisance." Kamoshida remarked as he stopped a few meters away from the group, a vicious smirk clear on his face while his golden eyes danced with delight. **"Breaking into my castle *again?* Hmph. You knaves must have a death wish."** His eyes then settled on Morgana, and his face twisted into a cruel leer. **"And the little foolish creature who dared to take my Treasure. You have a lot of nerve, showing your face here!"**

Morgana huffed. "Don't be so surprised." he said, narrowing his large eyes at the distorted teacher. "Taking the hearts of corrupt people like you is my job!"

"Hah!" the lecher reared his head back, releasing a laugh before a sickening grin formed on his lips, showing off his pearly whites. **"And you couldn't do it by yourself. What a weakling."** He then zeroed in on Ryuji, who suddenly took a step back when he felt Kamoshida's gaze bearing into him, yet tried to stand his ground by leveling a glare at the object of his hatred. **"Still, what a surprise to see *you* here, Sakamoto. Come for more *training* ?"**

Ryuji's nostrils flared as rage bubbled in his heart. "Cut the bullshit!" he snarled, throwing an arm and stomping his foot in anger. "We know what you've been doing to the Volleyball team! We're gonna make you pay for everything you've been doing, you sick bastard!"

"Oh really?" Kamoshida laughed, shaking his head in amusement. **"And what could you possibly do?"** His smile suddenly turned vicious as his eyes burned with a cold malice, enough to make a

shiver run down the spines of those in attendance. **"You, the Track Traitor, who betrayed his own comrades?"**

Akira frowned. "Track Traitor?" he repeated, confused by the name. Kamoshida referred to him by that name before. He looked at the former athlete, who seemed to be struggling to find some sort of retort while his body shook uncontrollably in anger. Makoto seemed to know the significance behind the name as she bit her lip, unable to meet Akira's gaze. Morgana didn't seem to be concerned with the name, as he kept a weary out on the guards in case they moved.

Kamoshida seemed to notice his confusion, and chuckled as he palmed his face. **"Oh? He didn't tell you?"** he asked, voice filled with glee before he waved a hand around, taking great joy in watching the former athlete squirm. **"That fool betrayed the trust of his teammates and cost them a shot at the nationals. It also cost him his own career when he dared to oppose me!"**

"Because you goaded him!" Makoto got out, finding the strength to let her own anger out as her eyes glared deep into the teacher with great intensity. "I always thought it was strange that you had the case of self-defense when you didn't have so much as a single wound on you. Not even a bruise. Now I know why." A snarl escaped her, and her eyes burned even greater. "You *wanted* him to hit you!"

His smirk grew. **"Ah, she speaks."** he said, finding amusement in her claim. **"How long did you intend to stand by the sidelines, Niijima-san?"** Makoto flinched, his scathing words hitting home for her, but remained defiant as she glared back at him. **"Hah...not that it matters. I suppose I can humor you."** Kamoshida chuckled as he gave a sneering look at Ryuji, who couldn't meet the gaze of his friends. **"That team was such an eyesore. The only team that deserves recognition should be the one who devoted his life to the sport, not a bunch of brats who run around for the thrill of it!"** A cold, menacing look burned in those golden eyes as he slammed his foot down, glaring at the teens and Morgana with so much force that one might mistake for them to combust. **"Had that foolish coach not tried to defend his team with a sound argument, I wouldn't have had to force him to resign. Instead, he tries to protect you brats...how completely pathetic!"**

"W-what?" Ryuji's eyes widened, his heart dropping at the words. "Y-you...!"

Makoto's eyes burned with anger. "You're despicable...!"

"And you're little more than a goody-two-shoes pushover who can't do anything." Kamoshida retorted as he turned his back to them, waving a hand. Upon his order, three knights stepped forward, black and red fluid spilling out from their bodies as they spasmed, soon erupting and destroying their armor and forming into familiar black horses with green horns. **"Execute these eyesores!"**

"Makoto! Ryuji!" Akira shouted at the two. "Get back!" His mask burned into flames, and Arsene emerged behind him, spreading his black wings in full glory. "Arsene! Take them down!"

At the same time, Morgana's eyes burned brilliant blue as the wind around him picked up. Forming from azure flames that burned around him was Zorro, swishing his sword and leveling a glare at the Shadows that stood before them. "Zorro, show your might!" he bellowed.

The two Personas then took to the action. Zorro charged in straight forward, wind gathering his tiny rapier as he swung it at the Bicorns. Two dodged it easily by prancing off to the sides while the other was struck dead on, flung back. However, it was quick to get back on the ground and let out an aggressive whine, slamming its hoof down and charging forward. Just as it rejoined its comrades for a frontal assault, Arsene came down from above, ramming his heels straight down on one of them. The force of the dive bomb was enough to throw two of the Bicorns down while the other was pinned beneath its feet. Using this opportunity, Arsene reared its head back to gather an Eiha in its palm and end the Shadows life. However, before it could, a sword rammed straight through its chest, ceasing its action.

"AAGH!" Akira cried, grasping his chest in pain as the damage Arsene received transferred over to him. Though no blade could be found in his own chest, he felt bone and flesh being cut through. Gritting his teeth, he looked up to find a golden knight with a black mask holding a sword, which was embedded up to the hilt in

Arsene's chest. "Nrgh! A-another one of them?!"

With a grunt, the golden knight kicked Arsene off of its sword, throwing it to the ground. ***"Pitiful fools who fail to see King Kamoshida's magnificence!"*** the knight bellowed in its warped tone, dragging its sword along its shield as black and red fluid began to flow out of the openings in its armor. Seconds later, it exploded and reformed into a new, more menacing shape. The first to form was a black stallion, whining and ramming its hooves against the floor, however an occupant was soon found riding its back. It was a knight wearing bloody red armor, horns poking out from its helmet while wild silver hair flowed from behind it, bearing menacing golden eyes. In its hand was a spear. ***"These halls shall be your gallows!"***

"Tch." Morgana huffed. "So they called in the big guns." A pulse echoed through him, his bond with Zorro becoming all the more fierce. With a swing, winds gathered and ripped around its rapier. Rearing its arm back, Zorro thrusted its weapon forward, creating a funnel of wind. The knights caught in it were blown away, their bodies smashing up against the walls in dissolving into the black and red goop they were commonly forming into while the Bicorns stood their ground, struggling to remain on their feet. The red knight, however, remained where he was, utterly unaffected by the impressive winds. As the shredding gales ceased, Morgana was left shocked by the fact that the Shadow remained standing. "W-what?!"

With a snort, the red knight pulled the reigns. Its steed charged forward, dragging its spear along the ground as sparks were flying about. Morgana, panicking, tried to throw the rider off of its stead by sending out crescent waves of razor-sharp wind. However, the red knight was agile as his steed evaded each attempt, dashing to the sides without losing speed nor losing focus of its target. To the cat-like creature's horror, the red knight was now within range. Pulling his lance back, power seemed to gather around the shaft of the weapon, cloaked in a red haze, and swung with fervor. The strike struck Zorro dead center in the chest, tearing straight through it and reducing the Persona to blue flames as it was sent flying.

Only moments later did Morgana scream out in pain, fur standing up as if having been electrocuted and falling to all fours. "Khrgh-!" he

gritted his teeth, trying to power through the pain. As Zorro tried to get back up, form covered in blue flames, it looked up to find a Bicorn charging ta it. Unfortunately, by the time it brought up its rapier to defend itself, it was too late. The Bicorn struck it dead on in the chest, horns ramming straight into it and dispersing it into mere blue embers. The force of the impact went straight to Morgana as he was thrown back, eliciting a cry as he smacked up against one of the busts in the main hall.

"M-Morgana!" Akira cried in concern. As Ryuji and Makoto quickly went over to try and help him, the frizzy-haired teen turned his attention to the Shadows before him. Snarling as a familiar sensation came over him, Arsene rose back up to its feet. The burning flames that represented its eyes and smirk burned fiercely, as if responding to its other self's rage. "Damn you!" Gathering Eiha into its claws, Arsene slammed them into the ground, sending them straight to the Bicorns that now set their sights on him. As the writhing mass of black-and-red energy ripped the ground apart, they soon reached their targets and engulfed them. One had been obliterated into smitherings, torn to shreds by the mass of power and reduced to mere goop while the other was knocked back, sliding across the floor. Weakly, it tried to get back up, albeit standing on shaky legs.

Just as Arsene was about to move in and finish it, the red knight from earlier intervened, slamming the back hooves of its steed into the Persona and knocking it back. It slammed up against the wall, creating discomfort for Akira who was still trying to recover from the stab wound his Persona received before he howled in pain, grasping his chest and falling to his knees. Arsene let out a cry of pain of its own as the red knight impaled it into the wall, lance going straight through its chest and leaving it there. It struggled to remove the spear, but the red knight refused to allow it. Releasing its grip over the spear, it turned its attention back to the teens, slowly approaching them.

"Shit, shit!" Ryuji cursed. He quickly looked around, trying to find a weapon. Finding a discarded sword nearby, left behind by one of the fallen knights. Quickly, he grabbed the sword and and rushed at the red knight. "Get away from my friend, you son of a bitch! Hyaaaah!"

Makoto's eyes widened in horror, realizing what the blonde was trying to do. "Ryuji, wait! Don't-!"

Sadly, it happened too late. Just as Ryuji tried to swing the blade at the red knight, the Shadow grabbed the tip of the sword with its armored hand. Ryuji's eyes widened and tried to pry his makeshift weapon out of the Shadow's grasp, only to find himself being thrown aside like trash. His body harshly hit the ground, smacking on his side. Cringing in pain, he got up on one knee, powering through the pain in his body as he looked at the Shadow in anger. However, his baneful gaze was soon redirected to the primary object of his ire as he soon made a reappearance from up atop the large staircase, where the giant portrait laid proudly before all who entered the main hall.

"Pathetic." Kamoshida huffed, shaking his head. **"These aren't even my best warriors, and here you are, struggling to fight back. I would have expected a bit more from you all."**

"Y-you bastard...!" Ryuji growled, trying to stand up as he grasped his side, trying to suppress the pain. "Stop this right now, or so help me, I'll-!"

Kamoshida narrowed his eyes, a cold smile spreading across his mug. **"Or you'll what? Betray your friends again?"** The words seemed to infuriate Ryuji even more as his glare intensified. **"Can't you understand already? The deaths of these two are on your hands, after all."**

"You leave him alone Kamoshida!" Makoto yelled in Ryuji's defense, making the injured teen look at her in wide-eyed surprise as she rushed over to him. "You have been abusing him and every student that has even looked at you funny since you've arrived and it's time for you to stop! Do you even care about the safety and wellbeing of your students?! How can you call yourself a teacher after everything you've done?"

"Hah! What I've done? What about everything that you've done during your tenure in this school? Or should I say everything that you haven't done…?" The self-righteous Shadow stated, causing her to look back at her with a stunned expression.

"…What?" She whispered.

"You claim to be looking out for the student body, stating that everything that you've done so far is in their best interest, but really, all you've been doing was looking out for yourself, just as I have…" Kamoshida stated with a shit-eating grin, his words shaking the poor girl to the core.

"W-What…? N-No, that's not-"

"Not true? The hell it isn't true!" The Shadow interrupted tauntingly. " **You didn't lift a finger to help the track team after I was done with them. Every student you aid was only for your benefit. You do anything a teacher says, just so you will have a good chance at high-end college. And if things don't go your way, you go straight to Kobayakawa and beg him to fix things so that you'll look good. All for your own self benefit. Face it, you're no different than me, so I suggest you abandon these pathetic commoners and join my side as my mistress. Trust me, I will make it worth your while…"**

"Your… Your…" Makoto repeated in fear, knowing full well the implications of Kamoshida's request, and feeling her world crashing down around her, not sure what to do. She never felt so afraid. So useless. So…

"Haha… Maybe you can convince your elder sister to join in on the fun as well? She was always quite the looker…" Kamoshida suggested, rubbing his chin as if in thought, making Makoto pale and her eyes shrink considerably at his request.

"…Sis? You want…"

"You stay the hell away from them you good for nothing bastard!" A roar of pure and utter fury echoed in the room, making everyone shiver in fear for a brief moment, and all turned to see Akira glaring at Kamoshida with so much hate that it was practically radiating from him. His fury seemed to be affecting his Persona as well, for Arsène had manage to brake the spear that had trapped him with sudden

ease before firing a powerful Eiha right at the crimson knight, which caused it and its steed to go flying towards the large picture of Kamoshida, much to everyone's surprise.

"What the hell?! Where did all this power come from?!" Kamoshida exclaimed, stepping back slightly in mild terror.

"You have no right…Absolutely No Right…To abuse Ryuji the way you did! No right to make such demands to Makoto! Those two have been nothing but helpful and supportive to me ever since I came to this god forsaken city and now its my turn to help them. If you think I'm gonna stand by and let you harm two of the few people in my life to give a damn about me, you got another thing coming!" Akira howled, his fury reaching its peak, and even Arsene reacting to his summoner's anger, letting out a furious roar that seemed to shake the entire room, terrifying the remaining Shadows, including Kamoshida slightly, before it zoomed right towards the Shadow 'king', before the crimson knight regained its bearings and rushed over to protect its lord.

"You stay away from Kamoshida, you wretched beast!" The crimson knight exclaimed to the Persona, materializing another spear in its hand and jabbed it right into the winged thief once more, causing it to cry out again once more before dispersing in azure flames. The force of the assault caused Akira to let out a cry of his own as he held his own chest, his sudden rush of power fading as he glared at both Kamoshida and his knight in rage and defiance.

"You…" He growled, wanting nothing more than to call out Arsene to rip Kamoshida's head right off, but before he could do so, he felt something pulling his pant leg, and looked down to see Morgana shaking his head.

"Take it easy with your Persona. You're burning up all your energy. If you keep recklessly calling your power out like that, you'll end up passing out or worse," He stated, panting heavily as the wounds of the fights began to take its toll on the odd cat creature.

"Aww… Ran out of steam? And here I thought you were going to actually do something worth while. I guess I was just setting myself up for disappointment…" Kamoshida scoffed tauntingly as

he snapped his finger, causing the crimson knight to straighten up while the weakened Bicorn from earlier rushed to his comrade's side, while another Bicorn appeared from the stairs and galloped over towards the others. **"Fun's over, boys. Finish them."**

Akira gritted his teeth, feeling frustrated. The burst had lasted no longer than a mere minute. *Dammit...at this rate...I!* A hand curled into a fist, anger rushing through his body. If only he had more power...power strong enough to...! He tried to call for Arsene again, but the pain racking his body wouldn't allow it. His mind felt to hazy, clouded by exhaustion. By now, he was just running on pure fumes. *Power...I need...more power...!*

...so you seek strength? For what purpose?

Suddenly, the world seemed to freeze, as if locked into place. Akira's eyes widened as he looked around. Makoto and Ryuji looked on with their expressions glued to their faces. Morgana's body was frozen solid. The red knight remained where he was, standing imposingly towards his foes. Kamoshida looked on condescendingly. This feeling...it felt like the world had slowed down. However, a presence had flowed through him. It was...strange. A foreign warmth wrapped around him, and the haze over his mind seemed to lose shape. Then, entering his field of vision, was a blue butterfly.

What...is that?

Tell me, the voice whispered. Why do you seek power?

Why...? Akira thought as his eyes trailed over to Makoto and Ryuji. The words he spoke so fervently before fueled his heart, and the same feeling took hold of him once more. *I want...to protect them!*

With that response, the butterfly glowed. For a moment, it's form shimmered.

Then we have reached an accord.

As a flood of power, calming yet overwhelming as when Akira first called upon his Persona, erupted inside of his own being, the world

resumed. The bloody red knight let out a roar as he raised his spear, power racing through it. As it threw it, Akira, in response, raised a hand to his mask. As soon as the flames erupted over his face, a new sound could be heard.

The sound of glass shattering.

Meeting the spear head on, much to the surprise of everyone, was not a pair of claws laced with black and red power...but a white harp.

Rather than Arsene, a new figure appeared above Akira. It was far more human than the gentleman thief, yet its body was more mechanical in nature. White cylinders took the place of its feet, bearing no toes or ankles whatsoever. Replacing its knees and connecting it to the white round orbs on its torso were silver joints. The same could be said for what could be called the elbows, though the arms were far more human like compared to the lower limbs, bearing five slender digits. The torso was a light shade of blue, though strangely there was a silver speaker placed atop its stomach. Its face was male, black with soft red eyes and white hair with the bangs sweeping over the right eye. Wrapped around its neck was a vivid red scarf. A pair of headphones could be found strapped to its ears with a strap over its head. In its hand was a large, human-sized white harp.

Morgana's blue eyes widened to the point where they would pop out. "N-no way...a second Persona?!"

Hahaha...so, you're the Trickster? a new voice called from inside Akira's head. The frizzy-haired teen looked up, startled by the new being's presence. Alright. I'll become your Mask. If you have the determination to protect your precious bonds, I'll gladly string the song of despair for your enemies!

His mask vanished into blue embers, encroaching and enveloping the Persona completely. As the flames faded away, it had changed considerably. The white legs and arms had turned jet black, with a unique design printed on its legs, bearing a set of circles on its legs with white stripes and red strips along the sides. Silver spikes encircled the wrist of it's left hand while the scarf developed a plaid pattern, similar to his school's pants uniform. The harp had also

turned crimson red with a pair of tiny bat wings at the top.

I am Orpheus, the Instrumentalist of Mysteries. the Persona bellowed. Now then, Trickster...let me see your soul's symphony!

Orpheus shrugged off the attack, knocking the spear away while the bloody knight caught in its hand. The Bicorns backed off, surprised and terrified by the flow of power. Meanwhile, Akira developed a toothy grin. This power...hahahaha! It felt wonderful! If he didn't know any better, it felt like he had summoned Arsene for the first time again! Emboldened by the increased power, Akira then leveled a red-eyed glare at Kamoshida, who was taken off guard by the sudden appearance of the new Persona.

"My turn."

Once again, the teen and the red knight engaged in battle.

Makoto and Ryuji, watched the clash between the two powerful beings in silence, Akira's words still echoing in their minds as they processed the meaning behind them.

Akira… They thought, utterly stunned by how much the transfer student had cared for them, despite not knowing them for very long.

For Ryuji, hardly anybody was willing to be at his side ever since the track incident, viewing him as a loose cannon who would lash out at anyone, friend and foe, if they looked at him funny. Akira, however, wasn't like that. The guy gave him, a total lost cause, a chance, something that he was never given since the end of the Track Team. Akira was willing to help Ryuji out in scoping out the stupid castle they were in, nearly getting the transfer student killed in the process, and still considered the former athlete someone to rely on. Ryuji honestly had no idea what to say about something like that, but he was sure as hell grateful to have met the guy.

For Makoto, she was stunned that someone so strong and self-sufficient admitted that she was one of his pillars of support, one of the few he had left if his words were truly accurate. All throughout their misadventure, she was feeling completely and utterly useless, unable to help out in any way and it was eating away at her. Even

back at school, she was struggling to both strive for the top and helping out those in need, and was not doing so well in either front if the words of Kamoshida were to be believed. But that didn't matter now, though. Akira, the guy who went and got himself arrested for trying to do the right thing, the guy who was being ostracized for a crime he didn't commit, and the guy risking his life to ensure the safety of both her and Ryuji, said that she, they, were the best thing that has happened to him since arriving. Those words had truly touched her, and Ryuji as well, no doubt, and like him, she was truly grateful to have met him.

Now…it was time to repay the favor.

As Orpheus and the red knights did battle, Kamoshida gritted his teeth, veins bulging across his face and slamming a fist down on the railing. **"What are you fools doing?!** " he shouted at the Bicorns in outrage. **"Execute this fool! NOW!"**

"Hold it!" A pair of voices called out, and everyone turned to see Makoto and Ryuji giving Kamoshida each a scalding glare, the latter having to lean on the former slightly for support.

"What…? You're still trying to defy me? What's the point? You two are powerless to stop me. You always have been, and you always will…" Kamoshida taunted, using the same words that had nearly broken the pair's spirit in hopes of seeing their sorrowful faces once again.

His words got a reaction from the pair, however, it wasn't one he was expecting.

"You shut your damn mouth, you bastard!" Ryuji countered, letting go of Makoto and took a small, but strong step forward.

"You have been going on and on about how useless we are and how little of a difference we make, and we have had enough of it!" Makoto added, also stepping forward slowly alongside the raging blonde.

"You abused the hell out of me, ruined my chance to give my mom an easy life and made my own life a living nightmare and I'm effin'

sick of it!"

"You have been covering your abuse with your false words and reputation for far too long! I will not stand for it any longer, Kamoshida!"

"You think you're hot shit, but you're not! You're just some two-bit has been who gets off making other people suffer!"

"Your crimes will never be forgiven! So long as I stand, I will never forgive you for the atrocities you've brought on to others! To me! To Akira and Ryuji!"

Then, with eyes blazing of pure fury, then stomped and aimed an accusing finger at Kamoshida, who recoiled from the mere shout.

"WE'RE KICKING YOUR ASS, YOU POWER HUNGRY ASSHOLE!" The two shouted as one, their words echoing throughout the entire room and making everyone stunned by their triad.

However, as those words continue to echo in the minds of the others, in their minds, another set of words were being heard. Words that no one other than themselves could hear, Makoto hearing one and Ryuji hearing another. What was strange about the words, however, were the voices that were making them.

They sounded familiar…as if the voices were their own.

Have you decided to walk the path of strife…?

A gentle, strong voice came from within Makoto, the voice sounding similar to her own, and asking a question that she already knew the answer of.

"Yes… Come to me!" She demanded, her crimson eyes filled with resolve, determination, and most importantly, rebellion.

The same emotions that were on Ryuji's eyes as he continued to glare at Kamoshida.

Very well. Let us proceed with the contract at once.

babum

"Gah!" "Argh!"

The two cried in pain simultaneously, gripping their heads as if they were about to explode as something powerful began to fill their minds and bodies, something that, despite the pain, felt like it was meant for them.

You made me wait for quite a while…

A smooth voice stated from within Ryuji, who, despite the head splitting pain, was able to hear it clearly.

You seek power, correct? Then let us form a pact.

He let out a howl of pain as he was thrown down to his knees, clutching his head. It felt as if there were several thousand nails scratching away at the inside of his skull, ripping through bone and flesh as if trying to free itself.

Since your name has been disgraced already, why not hoist the flag and raise havoc? The 'other you' that exist within desire it, thus…

As he rolled on the floor in pain, he began to feel something flowing through him. A surge of power that threatened to break the chains he found wrapping around him. Gritting his teeth and powering through the torment that he was being subjected to, he rammed a fist down on the floor and stood.

I am thou, thou art I… There is no turning back! The Skull of Rebellion will be your mask hence forth!

With those words ringing in his ears, a blast of sapphire embers formed over Ryuji's face, encompassing it briefly before vanishing, leaving behind a skull-shaped mask in its wake and Ryuji himself letting loose a menacing, golden eyed glare. As this was happening, Makoto was panting heavily, the pain overbearing but was still managing it somehow. She was glaring at Kamoshida heatedly, her eyes as gold as Ryuji's as she stomped on the ground hard enough to create a small, but deep indent in it.

I am thou, thou art I… You have finally found your own justice. Please. Never lose sight of it again.

Like Ryuji, she too saw the chains that bound her. Emboldened by the rush of power, however, these chains threatened to break apart as Makoto continued to trudge forward, eyes blazing in defiance.

This memorable day marks the graduation of your false self.

The words of her other self stated clearly within her, and with those words, a burst of fire formed over her face as well, dispersing just as quickly to reveal a sleek iron mask with two slits on the side for eyeholes.

It was at that moment that the pair of them reached for their masks, practically clawing at them in order to get them off. The pain was excruciating, even more so than the pain that they were dealing with before, but they knew they had to endure it. In order to help their friend and escape from this hellhole of a castle, they need to do it. They had to fight. They had to win.

They had to awaken.

And thus, with a resounding cry, they shouted to the heavens: *"PERSONA!"*

The masks came off, the pair screaming the coveted word simultaneously, and it was at that moment that two massive pillars of azure fire engulfed the two of them, their full potential finally unlocked, and their inner selves released into the open.

"No… Dammit, not again!" Kamoshida cried, a hint of fear in his voice as he stepped back a bit, the power the pair were releasing overwhelming him a bit. It was then that the flames began to die down, and what was left behind had him nearly shaking beneath his robe.

Ryuji and Makoto's clothes had changed during the awakening, similar to Akira. Their school uniforms were gone, replaced with what looked like a pirate ensemble with a black jacket with matching pants and knee pads, a red ascot, combat boots, and a pair of

yellow gloves, while Makoto was sporting a black and blue skintight suit with a long black scarf, a dark gray corset-style leather breastplate, shoulder and knee pads with spikes, and white gloves, giving her a look similar to that of a biker. The two of them actually looked quite similar in terms of their new outfits, but when it came to their Personas, they were vastly different.

Ryuji's Persona took the form of a skeleton pirate, complete with a golden hand cannon and riding a pirate ship as if it was a hoverboard. Makoto's Persona, however, didn't have a humanoid shape like the others, but instead was in the form of a sleek, powerful, state-of-the-art motorcycle with the image of a woman's face at the front of it. Ryuji was letting loose a manic grin as the power of his newly awakened Persona filled his entire body while Makoto simply stared at her enemies defiantly, revving the engine of her other self as if it were a real motorcycle.

The blonde delinquent looked at his hands, feeling the rush of power. His grin grew wider as he felt a wondrous euphoria rush through his heart, showing off a shark-like set of teeth. "Right on..." he whispered excitedly. "Wassup, Persona?!"

"You can say that again, Ryuji…" Makoto agreed, allowing herself a small smile at his direction before closing her eyes in concentration. "…I can feel it. My 'self'. 'Me'…!" It was then that she opened her eyes, a determined glint in them and turned to Ryuji, who gave her a quick nod.

"GUN IT!"

"GET WRECKED!"

With those words, the two sprung into action, Makoto driving her Persona right towards the Shadows while Ryuji hopped onto his Persona's boat and sailed right behind her. A moment later, Ryuji's Persona speed right past Makoto, ramming right into the crimson knight and sending it crashing to a wall while Makoto drifted right in front of the remaining Shadows, letting lose a wave of electric blue energy from the back tires of the Persona and blasting the horse-like monsters with it, sending them flying right towards their superior.

"Grrrr… Don't you dare mock us, you brats!" The crimson knight exclaimed as he pull himself and his steed up, the two Bicorns following his lead, but with much more strained effort.

Akira huffed as he tugged at his sleeves. "They're stating a fact, moron." he mocked, causing the Shadow to bristle with rage. Meanwhile, the frizzy-haired teen smiled in gratitude towards the two. "Thanks, you two."

"Just repayin' the favor, dude. You saved our asses plenty of times already. Now it's our turn." Ryuji assured with a thumb's up while Makoto nodded in agreement.

"He's right, Akira. You and Morgana don't have to do this alone anymore. Whatever challenges we face now, we'll do this together. I promise you, and myself, that I will not lose heart again. Ever. I will go forward at full speed nonstop. Right to the very end!" Makoto declared, her pledge touching Akira and making him give her the biggest smile he has ever seen on his face.

"Alright then, I'll hold you to it." He said after a moment before looking down to Morgana, who had been staring at the newly awakened pair with a wide smile of his own. "Looks like things are looking up for us now. You ready to give this another go?"

"You bet I am. This time we're taking these guys down for sure!" Morgana announced, his voice full of confidence and prompting Akira to let lose a small chuckle before turning back to the Shadows with a fierce look. He gave a vicious smirk as Orpheus danced behind him, readying its harp once more as Morgana, now back in the fight, called upon his own Persona. With the four of them now active, there was only one thing left to do:

Beat the hell out of the Shadows.

"It's showtime, Orpheus!"

"Zorro, show your might!"

"Johanna, full throttle!"

"Blast 'em away, Captain Kidd!"

TO BE CONTINUED...

A/N: Hooooooooly craaaaaap! This chapter clocked in at 8k words!

Special thanks go to Black Fuego, the author of Persona 5: Trials of the Trickster, for helping me with the awakening scene!

"Hmhmhm...so, that is Lavenza's guest?"

Unknown to any of the Persona-users facing the Shadows, a figure could be found watching the battle from afar, hidden in the shadows. The figure was a young woman, bearing platinum blonde hair that fell close to the chin and wondrous pools of gold, much brighter and sharper than that of the eyes of Kamoshida's Shadow self. Her attire, however, was bizarre. She wore a blue dress that resembled a stewardess' outfit with five black-lined circles outside small yellow circle, blue gloves, a blue attendant-like hat, black leggings and blue knee-length boots. In hand was a large tome, resembling the one Lavenza was in possession of. On her lips was a bright smile.

"I must say, I never would have dreamed that *his* Persona would resonate with him." the unknown woman said in slight wonder. "Perhaps Master is correct about this one."

She had never expected a Persona from the Compendium, much less Orpheus in particular, to be called upon by the newest guest of the Velvet Room. For a Persona from another soul to join the subconscious of another Persona-user...that was a rare feat. It brought forth many wondrous possibilities. One of which brought forth hope in her heart. For the time being, however, she would wait for him to grow. Wait for his soul to become even brighter. Wait for him to complete his contract.

Wait for him to win this foolish game.

"Please," she whispered to Akira Kurusu, knowing full well that he would not hear her. "Take good care of him. He's chosen to bequeath his power to you, after all."

With that, the mysterious woman walked away, vanishing into the blue door that she entered from. Passing through the doorway, the door swung close, breaking apart into motes of light and vanishing without a trace.

Persona Compendium:

Orpheus - Fool Arcana: [A poet of Greek mythology skilled with the lyre. He tried to retrieve his wife, Eurydice, from Hades, but she vanished when he looked back before reaching the surface.]

Captain Kidd - Chariot Arcana: [A famous privateer turned pirate. Before his unjust execution, he claimed to have buried his immense wealth somewhere across the vast ocean.]

Johanna - Priestess Arcana: [The mysterious female pope of the Middle Ages. She posed as a man and eventually made it up all the way to pop due to her unrivaled intellect. Her existence shook the history of the Catholic Church.]

Eligor - Emperor Arcana: [On of the 72 demons of the Goetia. He looks like a knight and has the power to see things to come. He also knows much about war.]

12th Heist: Prelude to Resolve

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Since time immemorial...they were known as,

"Tricksters."

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

12th Heist: Prelude of Resolve

With battle cries, the four Personas took to the battlefield. Eligor, with an enraged roar, leaped out.

The first to meet his charge was Orpheus, slamming its harp against the shaft of the spear. A resounding *'clang'* could be heard, followed

by a shockwave from the combined might of both blows before they resumed their clash. Each time, a heavy object met a long staff armed with a blade. With each strike, the air shuddered. Once the two parted from their fifth exchange, Eligor whirled around to deliver a strike from the side and impale the Persona fat the torso. However, Orpheus blocked by holding its harp over its chest, defending its body from the blow.

Just as Eligor was about to try another attack, the newly emerged Persona from Ryuji Sakamoto charged in from behind, boat scraping along the floor before taking aim with its canon. Volts of electricity began to build up inside the large barrel before the Persona gave a menacing grin, jaw shifting as it released the pent-up voltage. The blast of lighting struck Eligor dead center in the chest, knocking it right off its feet. As it bounced up the ground, Zorro jumped up, preparing its rapier for a gathered strike of wind. Before it could unleash it, however, a Bicorn went in and charged at it, horns primed and ready. Morgana, seeing the charge, responded quickly by having Zorro defend, using the wind already gathered around the blade to block the horns and throw it back to its comrades.

"Tch, so many...!" Morgana growled. "We won't be able to fight efficiently."

Makoto's eyes blazed as she revved up Johanna, the Persona shivering as power seemed to gather around the wheels. "Then let's even the odds." she said, looking at the boys. "Akira, Ryuji. You two handle that Shadow." She then turned her attention to the gathering crowd of Shadows, looking at Morgana. "Morgana, you and me are going to handle these guys."

"Heh." Ryuji flicked his nose. "Fine by me, Post-Apocalyptic Raider~"

"...do you want to get smacked?"

Ryuji let out a squeak, backing away fearfully from the dangerous glare the Student Council President leveled at him. Unless Akira was halucinating, he could have sworn he saw a hanya mask hover behind her, glaring at the poor former athlete with blazing fury. At any rate, the four now had a plan of action. With that in mind, they

soon clamored into action. Kamoshida, still shaking in fear by what had just happened, could only muster as much anger as he could and shouted at the top of his lungs.

"EXECUTE THESE FOOLS NOW!"

(cue: Mass Destruction)

With that declaration, Makoto charged headfirst against the gathering Bicorns that began to enter the room. Following their appearances were familiar faces - Incubus, Pyro Jack, and armored knights. Even still, she charged forward. Morgana hopped on to the back of the seat, holding on to her as she went straight for the gathering Shadows.

Meanwhile, Akira and Ryuji took on Eligor. The red knight stabbed down with his spear, aiming to skewer the two, but the two teens were too agile to land a hit on. Once the spear came close, they sidestepped or ducked underneath it. Once they came close, they summoned their Personas and attacked in unison.

"Orpheus!"

"Captain Kidd!"

Heeding their calls, the Instrumentalist of Mysteries and Pirate Captain attacks with blasts of flame and bolts of electricity respectively. Both elemental attacks charred the Shadow's armor as it grunted, armor creaking as the flames parted to reveal patches of soot painted across its bloody armor. Eligor staggered back, growling in rage as it extended a hand, creating a second lancer. "Insolent whelps!" the Shadow roared in outrage. "How dare you defy Lord Kamoshida?!"

"Oh, please!" Ryuji rolled his eyes. "As if that sicko is anything special!"

Enraged by his words, Eligor leaped up, throwing his spears at the two. Orpheus effortlessly dodged it, floating to the side while Captain Kidd's jaw curved upward into a menacing smirk, swishing its boat and destroying the spear before it aimed its canon, firing off a round

of lightning. Eligor dodged it with ease as it landed back on the ground, letting out a whistle. A familiar stallion was then called into the room, dashing forward. With a leap, it landed on its back, taking hold of the reigns and creating another spear. This time, the Shadow charged not at the Personas, but at their users. Dragging its spear along the ground, creating sparks in its charge, it readied an attack.

As it came within range, it readied to thrust its spear at Akira. However, the strike was blocked - courtesy of Orpheus and its crimson red harp. With a shrug, the Fool shrugged off the attack and allowed Captain Kidd to fire off another round. Eligor blocked it with its spear, destroying the blast and charging away before either Persona could land a hit on it. Akira frowned, noting that unlike before, it was much more agile on its horse rather than on foot. They were going to have to rectify that. He then turned his attention towards Makoto and Morgana, finding the two engaged in the horde of Shadows.

The cat-like creature had brandished what appeared to be some kind of toy-like scimitar, bouncing around and darting across the main hall as it avoided the knights that tried to strike it down. He used his speed to his advantage, confusing his prey by having the enemy Shadows accidentally attack themselves. A Pyro Jack tried to set him ablaze with a fireball, only for the fur bucket to evade and let a knight take the hit, knocking it back into another armored Shadow and clatter to the ground. An Incubus came down down from above, hoping to claw the cat-like creature in half. However, Morgana proved to be very agile as he performed a backflip, evading the strike with ease. He then used an exposed knight's back as a spring board, bouncing off of it and slicing the Incubus in half, reducing it to the familiar black and red goo. Using this momentum, Morgana stabbed his scimitar into another target in sight, piercing a Bicorn's skull with his sword. It let out only a weak cry of pain before he pulled out and jumped off, allowing it fall and dissolve into muck.

Morgana's fighting style was impressive. There was a certain elegance to it. Swift and cunning, using his surroundings to his advantage. However, he was confused by how he had a weapon on him, especially one that was several times bigger than himself.

That said...his finesse had nothing on Makoto's brutality as she rode

on Johanna. The motor cycle-like Persona barreled on and charged through any Shadow it came up against. At the speed it was going and the sheer amount of mass of its form, just what could stop it? The Student Council President held nothing back as she ran over the Shadows and practically crushed them with her Persona's powerful wheels.

Brilliant blue light seemed to gather around the tires, flowing like water while they grinded into any Shadows that she crashed against. As she swiveled around in a perfect 360 circle, throwing any Shadow near her away, she noticed a Bicorn charging at her. "Tch!" With a fierce scowl, she spun around, evading its charge easily before she slammed the back wheel into its body, trapping it against the wall. With a twist of the handle, the power-charged wheel began to spin, ripping through the Shadow's body with ease. It let out a pained squeal as it thrashed about before the wheel ripped it in half completely, letting its halves to dissolve. She looked up to find the Shadows inching closer towards her. Once more, she twisted the handle. In response, Johanna let out a shrill howl, azure flames bursting from the exhaust pipes.

She revved the Persona before going full throttle. The Shadows closed in as she charged in. At the last moment, she swiveled her bike around and struck her foes with power spinning around the wheels.

Combined with Morgana's swift attacks, the number of Shadows on their side was quickly dwindling.

A smile made its way to his face, proud to see that Makoto had embraced a part of herself she didn't realize she had. He had to admit, the fierce look on her face was a thing of beauty, especially as she tore through her enemies like a woman possessed. However, he had no time to ogle, for Eligor soon returned to the frey, charging at the two Persona users. "We need to knock him off the horse." he suggested as Orpheus stood by his side, readying his lyre. "Ryuji, you have any ideas?"

"Maybe one..." The former track star let out a mischievous grin.

Akira smirked. "Then I leave it to you."

Eligor released a battle cry as he came straight at Ryuji. He met the charge, dashing forward in spite of the ucomfortable ache in his leg before he slid down, easily evading the swing of the lance. As he rolled out of it, landing into a crouch, Captain Kidd rushed over to his side. "Blow 'em away!" he cried. Following its master's order, Captain Kidd slammed its foot on the head of its ship, taking aim and releasing a volley of electric blasts.

Like before, Eligor dashed and evaded each. However, he was moving right where he wanted him to. This time, Ryuji willed his Persona to fire twice in the same succession, once to keep the Shadow moving, the second one right where it was about to land. Eligor smashed away any shots that came to close to its body or striking its steed's body. However, as it leaped over a volley, it was unable to see the second blast coming its way. It struck the steed's head dead on, obliterating the skull entirely. Gravity came down upon the Shadow as its steed clumsily landed, legs bent in horrible ways while throwing the rider off its back, left to tumble through the floor. While its steed dissolved into black and red liquid. As Eligor stood up, glowering with anger, it looked up just in time to defend itself as Orpheus beared down on it, slamming its lyre straight on top of him.

The air shuddered as two opposing forces clashed. The massive weight of the lyre pressed against the shaft of the spear, the Knight straining to uphold the force behind the Instrumentalist's blow.

"Orpheus!" Akira cried.

The Persona's eyes glowed red in response as small sparks flickered before turning into a raging fire. The explosion that resulted practically left it frozen in places, flames engulfing its form. It let out a pained cry, but remained strong as it swung its spear, striking Orpheus in the face. As a result, Akira let out a grunt, touching his cheek which stung horribly. However, with this pain came opportunity as Captain Kidd slammed his ship into its body. "Graaah!" Eligor snarled in pain as its body flew with the ship before smashing straight into the center of the staircase. The Persona kept it pinned, though only half of its body was left trapped. It extended a hand, forging another spear, priming it to skewer the Persona in the face.

"Don't think so!" a familiar female voice roared as a silver-and-blue streak raced across the main hall, skidding across before slamming its rear into the Shadow's arm. Eligor howled, feeling as if its limb was being crushed. Its yellow eyes glared at Makoto, who now officially trapped the Shadow. Impossible...how?! How could she have defeated all of the Shadows so quickly?! Looking up, its eyes widened in fear when it saw the last of its comrades cut down by Zorro, ripped apart by fierce winds. "Ryuji, now!"

"My pleasure!" Ryuji showed off shark-like teeth. "Captain! *Ready* !"

The Persona's red eye burned wickedly, showing off another devilish grin as it aimed its canon in Eligor's face.

" *Aim* !"

Electricity gathered inside, building up. Sparks rampaged wildly as a fierce yellow light began to emerge out from the muzzle. With one final cry, Eligor's fate was sealed.

" ***FIIIIIRE*** !"

A massive burst of electricity shot out of Captain Kidd's cannon. The blast roared as it struck Eligor's head, practically obliterating its head at such close range. Its body spasmed, practically shaking from the power of the voltage. A second later, its body went limp. The red armor darkened, becoming a mixture of black and red before its remains slid down the wall, staining the velvet carpet.

It was over. All Shadows were eliminated.

They had won.

"H-hah..." Ryuji panted, his hands on his knees as the iron skull mask manifested over his face, Captain Kidd disappearing. The rest of the group gathered at his and Akira's side, looking up at a terrified and nervous Kamoshida, who watched in terror. "H...how do you like that...you son of a bitch?!"

The King of the Castle looked about them in slight terror, his body quivering. He had watched them struggle at first, the thieving cat and that upstart juvenile...and then this happens! Now the Student

Council President and the damned Track Traitor had power! Power to defy him! The very idea was enough to infuriate him, but the glare that Makoto aimed at him was enough to send cold shivers down his neck, especially as she twisted the handle of her Persona. The engine roared like a demon announcing its presence. As her red eyes bore into him, her mouth formed into a thin line. At the corner, she revealed her sharp molars.

"I hope you're ready for what's coming, you perverted bastard...!"

Kamoshida's eyes widened in fright, and immediately spun around on his heel, taking off in a sprint. **"Guards?! GUARDS!"**

"H-hey!" Ryuji called, trying to stand. "Get back here, you son of a-!" He was cut off as pain and exhausting hit him again, crumbling back to his knees. "Nnrgh! Dammit..."

Morgran looked around wearily. His ears twitched, hearing the rushing footsteps of heavy metal. "We can't stay here any longer." he said, looking back at the teens. "We have to go."

Akira nodded as he bent down, hoisting Ryuji's arm around his shoulder before pulling him up. "S-sorry about this." the former athlete apologized. "I promise I'll make it up to you."

"Worry about that later." Makoto advised as she hopped off her Persona, which erupted into azure flames. Moments later, the iron mask that she tore off earlier formed over her face once again. She went over and aided Akira, placing Ryuji's arm over her own shoulder. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

With that, the three students quickly made their way out before the guards could arrive.

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"D-damn..." Ryuji panted as he rested his back against the alleyway wall, slumping down to the ground. His mask was now lifted up to his hair, feeling it chaffing against his skin somewhat. Sweat poured down his face while the exhaustion and adrenaline from earlier was now wracking against his body. "I'm...beat..."

"You're not the only one." Makoto said in agreement. Throughout the whole thing, she had been running off of the pure adrenaline the surge of power gave her. Her heart raced as she rode about on Johanna, destroying the Shadows one by one. It was like a beautiful euphoria for having her heart laid bare in the open - her truest feelings emboldening her actions. It was like an addicting drug. However, the effects had worn off once they had made their escape. While she was standing, she had to lean on the brick wall behind her for support as she removed her own mask, holding it one hand. Curiously, she looked over at Akira, who looked no worse for wear. "Is this how you felt...after you got your Persona, Akira-kun?"

The frizzy-haired teen nodded, pulling the mask away from his face. "Yeah...for the most part."

He could still vividly remember his first summoning. The wondrous rush of power. The feeling of letting himself act however he pleased. The desire to wipe that arrogant look off of Kamoshida's face. The power Arsene allowed him to call upon was incredible. It was a beautiful euphoria. Of course, the same could be said about Orpheus. He was still bewildered by the fact that he had the power of yet another Persona to call on, and noted how different it felt. The feeling Orpheus brought forth was...strange. It was warm and gentle, as if holding hands with a friend. It brought forth a certain warmth in his heart, recalling the Persona's eagerness to grant him power.

That being said, one thing bothered him. Its words.

"Trickster."

Igor referred to me by that, too... Akira thought, disturbed. *What does that even mean?*

"But...man!" Ryuji laughed as he took his mask out of his hair, looking at it with an excited grin. "Talk about awesome...with this..." His grin widened, showing off sharp teeth as well as the thoughts of finally getting back at Kamoshida for everything he's done. "We can finally get some payback!"

Makoto smiled somewhat, also eager to inflict her punishment on the teacher. After what he said about Sae, and his cold and callous

nature towards his students...she was more than ready to give the bastard the beating he so rightfully deserved. That said, however...

"...why are we dressed like this?"

Akira had to cover his mouth, stifling his laugh at Makoto's discomfort by her attire. While the look certainly matched her Persona - the look of a ferocious biker - it was most definitely a stark contrast to her rather calm yet strict self. It made her look like some kind of hooligan - a look that Sae would no doubt be left horrified to see. That said, however, he could also see the beauty of it. It matched her rather fiery, strict self that she rarely let out. He had seen small signs of it, but back there in the main hall? That was his first true look.

And it was *beautiful.*

"Actually, now that you mention it..." Ryuji looked at his own attire, slightly confused. "What the heck even is this?"

Morgana shook his head, placing his tiny hand against his enormous head. "You're just now noticing it?" he asked in exasperation before he shrugged. "Those clothes are from your powers - your Personas. Think of them as the representation of your 'Will of Rebellion.'"

Will of Rebellion... Akira thought, remembering what Igor said before. *The desire to resist the rules placed upon one by others...*

"Still, though..." Akira broke away from his thoughts, noticing Morgana's star-struck gaze as he stared at the avian-masked boy in utter wonder. "To have two Personas...that's incredible!"

Makoto tilted her head. "Is it unusual for someone to have more than one Persona?"

" *Very* unusual." Morgana nodded, his gaze turning serious. "I knew you were something special, but still...this is amazing."

"That aside..." Ryuji grunted as he managed to get back on his feet, ignoring the aching pain in his knee, turning towards the cat. "Back inside, you mentioned a way of exposing Kamoshida. What was that?"

"Ah, right..." Morgana recalled, clearing his throat. "As I told you before, the Metaverse is a world made up completely of cognition - mental perceptions. Warped, twisted desires create Palaces." His eyes focused on the castle behind them, right where Shujin Academy stood in reality. "Kamoshida's Castle is one example. However, those twisted desires that made it become a Palace spawn from a certain something. In most cases, it's an object. This object is the core of a Palace." A glint ran through Morgana's eyes as a toothy smirk formed across his face, crossing his arms. "We call it...a **Treasure** ."

"Treasure..." Makoto whispered, understanding the significance behind the name. Even so, the idea was still incredible. The situation still felt so surreal to her, yet denying it would be foolhardy. As it stood, she needed to understand this place as much as possible. "And this Treasure...is the heart of a Palace?"

Morgana nodded. "That is correct." he answered, pleased. "The Treasure is what keeps the Palace thriving. In a way, it's what keeps the place standing in the Metaverse. Now, suppose you take away the Treasure...what would happen to the Palace?"

"If you took it away?" Ryuji frowned, cocking his head as he scratched his cheek. If he were honest, the only things he got out of this situation was that this world was made up of people's thoughts, the Palace was how Kamoshida saw the school, and it's heart was apparently some fancy decor. "Uh...I guess the Palace would go away?"

Morgana chuckled. "And if the Palace is made up of warped desires...what would happen to Kamoshida?"

The three looked on in wonder, looking back at the Palace. The question had brought forth a surprising uncertainty. Destroy a man's warped desires...what would happen, indeed? Makoto was still trying to wrap her head around the idea, and Ryuji could barely think about what it meant. Akira folded his arms, tilting his head as he tried to understand. If this castle was made up of Kamoshida's own twisted desires, what would happen to the perverted teacher himself is such desires were taken? Moreover, what would be the overall impact of such a thing? How much would it affect him? So little? Or

a major impact? The matter of the mind is still unknown to him, though the implications that Morgana spoke of was certainly something to think about.

When it became clear that no one had a suitable answer, Morgana gave them one. "He would have a change of heart."

"A-a what?" Ryuji gawked, eyes wide. He looked back at the castle, then back to Morgana. "What does that mean?"

Makoto pressed her knuckles against her chin, furrowing her bow. "Change of heart..." she muttered, closing her eyes. A few seconds of thinking later, and she opened them again. "You mean...his personality would change?"

"That's right. By taking his Treasure, you're essentially reforming his heart. Simply put, he'd be a respectable member of society." Morgana was practically giving off a smug grin by their astounded expressions. He didn't blame them. After all, the idea of changing someone so drastically was practically was beyond them. How could they even consider such an immense possibility? That said, however, a part of Morgana was still unsure, something he couldn't quite express to them yet. There was still so much to learn about the Metaverse. Possibilities left to be discovered. Regardless of his doubt, he continued on. "His distorted desires would collapse upon itself, leaving him to regret his own actions. To put it simply, he'd confess his own crimes."

Ryuji opened his mouth, trying to find some way to express his disbelief, but the words remained stuck inside his throat. Instead, he was only able to gape at such wondrous information. "Unbelievable..." Makoto whispered, utterly amazed. "A-and this is actually possible?"

"It is." Morgana answered. His expression then turned grim, as he was also forced to explain a possible factor. Given that even his own knowledge of the Metaverse was limited, there was no true guarantee that Kamoshida would be *fine* from the effects. "That said...there's also one other important thing I should mention."

Akira frowned. "What else is there?"

"It's true that by taking away Kamoshida's desires, he would have a change of heart...but desires are what drives a person. For example: the will to sleep, eat, find love, seek a job - those sorts of things."

There was an unsettling look spread across the three teen's faces as they looked at one another. Morgana's tone, and his words, left them rather uneasy. "What are you getting at exactly?"

"If all of those yearnings were to disappear completely, it would be no different from someone who's cognitive functions shut down completely. If not cared for properly, their lives would also be put in danger."

Horror descended upon their faces - Ryuji and Makoto in particular. After what happened earlier, coupled with Ryuji's personal experience with Kamoshida, they had more than enough reason to get back at Kamoshida for everything he's done. Not just for themselves, but also to the students he tortured. The idea of him publicly humiliating himself, exposing his crimes before everyone and then being imprisoned for such horrible actions, brought forth future excitement and satisfaction. However, the idea of *killing* a man was just...it was unthinkable! They may have hated Kamoshida, but not to such an extent! They wanted the man to confess his crimes and pay for his sins, not die!

Akira, for his part, was equally as disturbed. Kamoshida was scum, there was no doubt about that, but...was the risk really worth it? A darker part of his mind, however, thought otherwise?

Would anyone really miss someone as horrible and despicable as that? the tempting thoughts whispered into his ear. *He's ruined so many lives, after all. He treats his team as if they were his own slaves - those under his care even worse. And who knows what he does to those of the fairer sex... Wouldn't it better to just watch the man squirm like the filth that he is and let him fall?*

As much as he hated to admit it, such gruesome thoughts had a point. Would anybody really miss someone like Kamoshida? Certainly not his victims. Even a small part of Akira wanted him gone, even though the worst the man had done was spread his record among the student body.

However...

"...we're not going to kill him."

The two looked at him, surprised by his words. Morgana's eyes stared at him, meeting his gaze. Pools of gray remained resolute and firm in this decision. Slowly, Makoto gave a shaky nod. "T-that's right." she said, stuttering as she got over her horror. "Kamoshida-sen-" she cut herself off, shaking her head and correcting her words. "Kamoshida may be a horrible human being, but...he doesn't deserve to die."

"Y-yeah!" Ryuji agreed with their sentiments, bobbing his head furiously. "What they said!"

Morgana regarded their answers for a moment before he shook his head. "Well, whatever your decide is up to you." he stated. "I just gave you the option." He hopped down from the garbage can, walking towards the castle. "As for me, I'm taking the Treasure regardless."

"Why?" Akira asked, watching the cat leave and return back to the fray. "Why do you want to take the Treasure?"

"That's for me to know," came the cryptic answer that made him scowl. "And for you to find out." With a wave of the paw, the cat-like creature took off, vanishing inside the castle and leaving the three teens to themselves.

Naturally, receiving such information left them with a tense silence. Makoto could barely afford to say a word, still too disturbed to hear such a thing. Ryuji looked as if he wanted to say something, but was unable to find the correct way to save it. Akira tried not to think much of it. He eventually gave a tired sigh, running a hand through his scalp. "Let's head back." he suggested to the two. If they stayed here any longer, there might be the possibility of encountering Shadows again. Ryuji still looked a bit winded, though Makoto still looked like she could go a round or two. Akira, however, was beginning to feel the onset of a headache.

"R-right." Makoto nodded her head, shivering.

With that in mind, Akira took out his phone and opened the app, pressing the necessary buttons before reality began to warp and twist around them.

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[You have returned to the real world. Thank you for your hard work.]

The navigator's voice had done nothing to ease the tense atmosphere of the three teens as the dark and dreary world of the Metaverse returned to normal. The dark sky became a dull shade of orange, the castle dissolving into the mundane prison they attended on a daily basis. A few students were also forming into the picture, walking out of the building and making their way home.

"...that effin' sucked." Ryuji muttered distastefully as they walked out of the alleyway. "Stupid cat, telling us that crap..." He shook his head, trying to forget the disturbing information they learned. "I-I mean, there's no way we'd actually go through with that." A low growl escaped from his throat as he kicked at the ground. "Stupid cat, getting us worried over something stupid like this!"

Makoto wasn't sure what she was supposed to say. Her heart was clenched, and her stomach ached. She felt bile rising from her throat. Noticing this, Akira gently touched her shoulder, offering some comfort. She flinched under the touch, but then relaxed, releasing a sigh of relief. The earlier stiffness in her limbs vanished, and the strain seemed to lessen. "Sorry..." Makoto apologized. "After Morgana told us that...I'm not sure what to think." She closed her eyes as she shook her head, adament in her decision. "I said it before. Kamoshida may be a lot of things...but he doesn't deserve to die."

"Amen to that." Ryuji nodded, but then frowned. "But...from what that stupid cat said, taking his Treasure sounds like the best idea." He groaned as he rubbed the back of his head. After a while, though, he then narrowed his eyes, looking up at the two. "There has to be someone here that's willing to talk."

Makoto shared his thoughts it seems, as she too nodded vigorously. "The rally is tomorrow, right?" she asked, earning a nod from the two. "I'll double my efforts. There's still a few who I haven't talked to yet. In the meantime, though, we should lay low. If what Morgana said is true, then us openly investigating might cause something to happen in that Palace place."

"You really think so?" the former athlete questioned, confused. He then shrugged. "Well, whatever." He then sported a grin, slipping his hands in his pockets. "Anyways...you two free?" Makoto and Akira turned to Ryuji, cocking their heads. "I dunno 'bout you guys, but..."

A low growl, reminiscent to that of a starving wolf letting out a ferocious snarl before its precious prey, rumbled loudly for all to hear.

"...I'm really effin' hungry."

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The two had accepted his invitation. As it turned out, Ryuji had taken them into Shibuya, the same place where Akira had met Sae Niijima for the first time. Passing through crowded streets, they went into Central Street - a crowded space with a constant flow of people with an assortment of businesses and shops lined up on either side. Currently, Ryuji was treating them to something to eat at the Beef Bowl shop. Makoto had ordered a relatively light meal whereas the former athlete's order was a Mega Beef Bowl...which was more or less just noodles with few veggies and piled with meat. Akira ordered a rather simple dish of udon with a side of rice. As they ate, they somehow wound up in a conversation regarding each other's pasts.

Makoto's was pretty simple - she lost her parents at an early age. Her father had died when she was barely old enough to remember, leaving her older sister to raise her by herself. It had been tough, but it was manageable. In fact, her sister had managed to reach a job as a Prosecutor and was quickly regarded as one of the best in Japan. Makoto had wished to help Sae, so she did everything she could to earn herself a shot at both a scholarship and a college recommendation. She stayed at the top of her class, took every

extracurricular activity she could get her hands on - every action was carefully planned for that. It was tough for her, but it was an overall successful plan for her to help her sister.

Ryuji's was a bit tough to hear. His father was apparently a drunk who beat him and his mother at every chance before he one day disappeared. Perhaps it was the massive amount of debt, or maybe he just died from drinking too much. Ryuji didn't care - the blight that infested his mother was gone. Like Makoto, he did the best he could to support her. While he wasn't the best at academics, the track was where he felt at home. Ask anyone, and they would tell you that Ryuji Sakamoto was a born natural. The fastest of his class. He was immediately scouted by the track team in his first year at Shujin and had a shot at a Track Scholarship. Of course, that went downhill when Kamoshida decided to screw things up. Enforcing strict training regiments, verbal abuse...he was trying to break them. Especially Ryuji. Somehow, he found out about his father and had it leaked to the track team. After that, Ryuji punched him and, well...the rest was history.

However, their stories paled in comparison to Akira's circumstances.

"You were *WHAT?!"* Ryuji cried in outrage and disbelief, his head snapping fast enough to crack a few bones in his neck.

Akira glared at him. "Pipe down, will you?" he hissed. "You're being loud."

"S-sorry...but still, what the eff, man?!"

Makoto, who was hearing this story for the first time, shared similar thoughts as Ryuji as her hands threatened to break the chopsticks in her hands. "That's horrible!" she said angrily. "Why in the world did the police side with him?!"

"I don't remember much about it." Akira sighed as he set his chopsticks down, recalling the incident as best he could. He had done his best not to dwell on it too much, focusing on his probation rules to stay out of trouble and not get himself thrown into juvenile hall. "But what's done is done. I don't regret doing what I did...but it still pisses me off."

"I don't blame you." Ryuji snarled. "Seriously, the hell?"

Akira failed to see why there so upset. The past was merely that, the past. The court had decided that this was to be his fate. Overruling a decision in court would be next to impossible. Sae had told him as much before. Still, though...for what it was worth, he couldn't help but feel his heart beat in happiness at their anger of his unfair past. In all honesty, after the incident, what with his friends choosing to leave him behind after the stigma placed upon him by the drunk and court order, he had forgotten what it felt to be in the presence of honest friends. People he could be with, people where he could leave his falsely crafted image behind and stand with in earnest.

Slowly, a smile manifested. "Thanks." he blurted out without thinking. The two then stared at him in confusion. Blinking, he realized his action and chuckled, pushing up his glasses. "Sorry, it's just...it's been a while since anyone really cared about me this much."

"Hey!" Ryuji grinned wickedly, patting him on the back. "What're friends for, man?"

Makoto nodded earnestly, smiling. "Of course." she said with conviction. Friends was more than accurate, especially with what happened today. "If there's anything you need, let us know."

The frizzy-haired teen's smile grew as he nodded. Unknown to him at the time, the unseen blue butterfly that sat on his shoulder glowed, enamored by the affection they showed him. It was as if it was reacting to his own comfort in these bonds...as he should. The butterfly bore within a will - a will of one who had watched him thus far. Like it, he found strength in these bonds. The boy didn't know it yet...but these bonds would become his strength.

Without a word, and still yet remaining unseen to the eyes of the Persona-users, the butterly flapped its wings and flew away, vanishing into tiny motes of blue light.

TakeYourTime

In a certain place, two cards danced together over the open pages

of a large tome, held in the hands of a smiling girl. One card showed a warrior with an arm bound in a cast, the other holding a sceptor as he rode in a stalwart chariot led by horses of opposing color. The other was a woman in cloth, sitting atop an ornate chair while reading an obscene book. "It has only been two days since he's arrived in the crowded city that is Tokyo," Lavenza spoke with a certain giddiness as the cards fell into her tome. The pages, once blank, shown with light before dimming, revealing inscriptions written into them with the cards situated on one side, and the scene of Akira Kurusu with Ryuji Sakamoto and Makoto Niijima on the other as if to retell the moment of their wonderful bond. "And yet he's obtained the strength of the **Priestess** and the **Chariot** ."

Softly, she shut her tome and turned towards her master, who grinned in delight as a card danced atop his desk. Compared to the previous cards, which possessed a red and black disposition with a red background, this card was much more ornate and traditional, bearing a blue, black and white design. The back had a checkered background with a black and white face in the center. In the front showed a man with a bandana atop his head with a stick carrying a bag over his shoulder, a dog following behind him.

"Indeed." Igor said in delight. With a snap of his fingers, the card broke apart into pieces of light, which seemed to dance around in his palm before clenching it in his fist. "However, this is but the first step of a long and arduous journey." A chuckle escaped him as he closed his hand, entrapping the dancing pieces before opening it again, revealing the avian mask that embodied the rebellious spirit of Akira Kurusu. "Hmhmhm...I am truly looking forward to this wonderful journey of yours, Trickster."

TO BE CONTINUED...

Confidants:

Ryuji Sakamoto - the CHARIOT: [A former star athlete who fell into disgrace. Awakened to the power of Persona when denouncing his tormentor Kamoshida. The closest to relate to Akira's hardships.]

Makoto Niijima - the PRIESTESS: [The Student Council President of Shujin Academy. Awakened to her Persona alongside Ryuji when denouncing Kamoshida. She helps Sae in looking after Akira while at school.]

A/N: Well, I'll be damned. This is probably one of my more longer chapters, excluding the previous one since I had Black Fuego's help. Guess what, my peeps? This story's going into overdrive, with updates saddling up on the horizon as best as I can!

However, I ask that you do not get your hopes up. Remember, I am human. I have a life. And I make mistakes.

As a brief recap, Makoto and Ryuji have now awakened to their Personas and learn that they can make Kamoshida confess his crimes...with the possibility of him dying. Obviously, this doesn't sit well with them, though can they find an alternate way to make the bastard pay for what he's done? And what will happen to Ann and Shiho in the coming days? Nothing good, I can tell you that much.

Ann's awakening is steadily coming up. As soon as two or three more chapters.

I want to make longer chapters. Really, I do...but I just don't have the creative patience for it.

Also, I'm a bit disheartened that I got 11 reviews compared to the many I got last chapter, excluding guest reviews. Strange. I thought a lot of people would review given that many of you wanted to review when I finally got around to Makoto and Ryuji's awakenings. Bah, oh well...I shall take whatever I can get.

If you've been keeping up with my poll, however, you'll notice that it is finally done. So who is the lucky lady?

...not telling~ You'll have to wait until I do the romance chapters...which is WAY FAR OFF IN THE FREAKING FUTURE!

With that said, though, my current poll is to do another story. My creative juices are flowing and in spite of me having one too many

stories already, my brain has to decided, "Hey let's add another one to the list!" I don't regret the decision, but my fingers certainly will~ You can choose up to ten of the ones I have listed.

Welp, that's it for now, everybody! Later losers, and I'll see you all next heist!

13th Heist: Backstage Preparations

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The world is not as it should be.

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Since time immemorial...they were known as,

"Tricksters."

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

13th Heist: Backstage Preparations

"Acting by yourself would have been more efficient." Sae said as Akira took a moment to gather his thoughts after a small bout of pain. The drugs effects were still leaving behind a cloudy haze, making it difficult to recall the exact details of his past, though he was still able to power through it. He had been remembering events

perfectly - as perfect as can be with his rather incredulous story - in spite of the horrible condition he was in. "After all, if you went through this solo, there wouldn't have been any need to rely on others and risk them becoming involved." Her eyes softened as the teen looked up, barely able to stand his battered face. Her knuckles shook with anger, wanting nothing more than to pommel the face of whoever did this to him. "But there were merits to having comrades, aren't there? Resources, information..."

Akira nodded dimly. "There were." There was a brief pause as he bit his lip, closing his eyes. "But...they weren't just associates or comrades. They were...people I could trust. Friends. People I could entrust with my life."

"...was I one of those people, Akira-kun?"

A tense silence followed.

"...forget it." she sighed, shaking her head. No, she shouldn't get emotional. She couldn't let personal feelings meddle with her job. She was not here as someone who cared for him. She was here as a prosecutor investigating the Phantom Thieves. Nothing more. Nothing less. Even still...it angered her that things wound up like this. "Continue on with your story."

Akira gave a slow nod and continued his rather bizarre tale. "After Morgana told us that if we stole Kamoshida's Treasure from the Palace, with the added possibility he could die, we tried to find another way. We investigated the students again. There had to be someone - *anyone* - who was willing to tell us." He gave a somber laugh, shaking his head. "Of course...it wasn't that easy. After all..." There was a coldness in his eyes - a chilling look that sent shivers down Sae's spine as she looked at him - as he looked up and looked her dead in the eye, the beginnings of a scowl touching upon the corners of his lips. "...Kamoshida was just that careful."

The night they returned, Sae Niijima was nowhere to be found. She had left behind a note, saying that she would be home late once again, which of course led Makoto and Akira to go to bed early. The

frizzy-haired teen half-expected to enter the Velvet Room once again, though he surprisingly found himself waking up to the sound of Makoto knocking at his door. The way to school had been in tense silence, no doubt due to the lingering effects of Morgana's words to them. Neither one spoke a word, unwilling to remember the severity of such words.

Classes came and went before the rally had begun. Currently, everyone who wished to participate, or at least spectate the game, stood in the gym. On one side of the court was the teachers - Kamoshida among them and the fan favorite. On the other side were a mixture of male and female students, trying - and failing - to defend. Akira, for his part, wasn't interested in the game whatsoever, though even he was forced to admit that the perverse king of the castle was certainly worthy of the gold medal he obtained in the past. The students were clumsy in their movements and only a few were actually competent enough to move in and take the initiative. Kamoshida, however, easily showed his dominance in this field as he effortlessly scored and defended.

"Go, go! Let's go Ka-mo-shida~!"

Ryuji groaned as he shook his head. "Seriously?" he asked in exasperation. "The bastard even has his own cheerleading squad?"

Akira shrugged his shoulders as he continued to fiddle with his phone. His eyes were primarily fixed on the Metaverse Navigator application. He was still no closer to figuring out why his phone, of all things, had been installed with such impressive hardware. It was even stranger given the fact that it enabled one to traverse a world made purely of cognition. The idea was absurd, had he not experienced it himself. The pulse that resonated at regular intervals - his Persona - was proof of that. He idly noted how another pulse accompanied the first, this one much softer and kind in comparison to Arsene's rapturous waves of repressed rage and vengeance. If Igor and Morgana's words were true - in that a Persona embodied one's own rebellious soul, then it was understandable.

So what made Orpheus so unique? Moreover...why was he granted the power to wield multiple Personas? The more he thought about it, the more confused he became.

A small vibration rippled through his hand as his screen displayed a notification. Out of the corner of his eye, Akira found Ryuji taking out his own phone. Opening up the notification, it was a message from Makoto.

MN: Pretty sure by now that Kamoshida's aware that we're snooping around, given how many people I asked the other day. I hate to ask this, but can you and Ryuji ask around?

RS: You sure that's a good idea, Prez? In case you forgot, me and Akira aren't exactly...well, you know.

As much as Akira hated to admit it, Ryuji had a point. The chances of anyone willing to talk to them was next to nothing. Both were marked by Kamoshida as 'delinquents' and 'troublemakers.' Therefore, trying to gather info would be a daunting task.

AK: We'll see what we can do.

MN: Thank you, Akira. I'll try as best I can on my end. I'm counting on the both of you.

The discussion ended there as the two teens closed the chat. Around that time, they noticed how the crowd seemed to be especially charged. Looking at the match, they soon began to see why. The students looked like they were so ragged and barely able to keep up, it wouldn't be a surprise if one fell flat on their butt at this point. Some hadn't noticed, but Akira and Ryuji did. There was a brief, subtle yet malicious smile on Kamoshida's face as the volleyball went high into the air.

The king chose then to assert his dominance in the sport.

With an impressive jump, he reached the ball in seconds and struck it straight down. The ball was sent fast at the ground and would have hit the floor, thus marking another point, had one boy chosen to move. He remained rooted on his feet in spite of the urgent warnings earlier before the spike to move and paid the price. The ball slammed right into his face and knocked him right off his feet, knocking him to the floor.

A whistle blew to mark a suspension in the match as a few students clamored around the fallen. Kamoshida seemed to have a smug smirk on his face, but it disappeared as soon as it appeared as he rushed over, ducking underneath the net. "You okay?!" he called as he rushed over. The student groaned as he sat up, rubbing his face. Already, the beginnings of a black eye were beginning to form as a ring of black and blue formed around his socket. Grimacing, the teacher looked around. "Would someone take Mishima-kun to the nurse's office?"

Ryuji rolled his eyes, scoffing. "Of course..."

Where the former athlete found disgust, Akira found opportunity. As soon as he got a good look at the fallen teen's face, his feet were already moving, ignorant of Ryuji's confused remark behind him. "I can take him, Kamoshida-sensei." he said as he walked over. Hearing him, some immediately backed off. Though Akira didn't pay much attention to the passing faces in the halls, a few looked familiar - among the faces were those who continued to make up new rumors. He paid them no heed, however, instead focusing on the bruised student on the ground. Sure enough, as he got closer, his suspicions were confirmed.

It was the boy from the cage.

"A-ah...!"

There was a slight fear in the boy's eyes, recognizing Akira immediately. Kamoshida ignored this as he instead gave a nod of gratitude to Akira. Reluctantly, the boy staggered to his feet as Akira pulled him up. Once he made sure that he was capable of walking, albeit shakily due to the force of the blow, he escorted the named Mishima to the nurse's office.

TakeYourTime

"Sorry to take your time, Suzui-san."

The rather pale girl who sat at the table, second-year Shiho Suzui, manage to give Makoto a sheepish smile as she gratefully accepted the cup of tea she was offered. "It's no problem." she assured as

she gently wrapped her hands around the cup, bringing it to her lips. After a small sip, she set it down to the table. As she did, Makoto took notice of her physical form. It took every ounce of willpower not to visibly cringe at the sight of her battered body.

Her knee was wrapped in a black brace, there was a dark red, angry bruise right above her right eye, and just below her eye there was a band-aid with a clearly visible bruise right underneath. It was far too big to be an ordinary bruise. Ignoring it for now, she took her seat opposing Suzui. "Are you alright?" Makoto asked in concern. "Those bruises look awfully painful. If you want, I can ask you another time."

"N-no, really." Suzui shook her head. "It's fine. Honest!"

"If you're certain." Makoto shrugged.

Truth be told, this was a tactic she had seen on shows and movies once. An interrogation technique, if you will. The purpose was to lure your target into a false sense of security, ease them a little before tightening their hold. In a way, it was like trying to bait a fish and then reel them in. Given that this was real life, however, and not fiction, the idea of this succeeding would be up for debate. Either way, there were lessons to learn from.

"Before we start, I have to ask. How is your time in the volleyball team? Good, I hope."

There! A small fidgeting motion. Nervousness in the hands as they unconsciously rubbed together. "It is." she answered shyly. "It's a bit tough for me. Like Mishima-kun, I'm rather horrible at it. I tend to mess up easily."

"Really?" Makoto smiled somewhat, leaning forward. "The way I heard, Kamoshida-sensei-" Ugh. Gods forbid, it was so disgusting to add that to that filthy bastard's name! "-gave you a starter position in the upcoming tournament, right? I'd say you're doing something right."

"I-I suppose." Suzui tried to give a reassuring smile, whether to herself or Makoto was up for debate. However, the girl could recognize it easily - it was fake. *Strike two.* "The training is rather

harsh."

The Student Council President nodded. "It must, given how many of your teammates end up needing medical attention." She most certainly did not miss the look of nervousness and fear in Suzui's eyes. "If it's that stressfull, couldn't you ask Kamoshida-sensei to lessen up? As a teacher, he would have to listen to your complaint, shouldn't he?"

"It-it's not as troubling as you think." There it was again. The hasty defense. Just as quick as the others. Her eyes narrowed. *Strike three.* "I mean...it's...um..."

Makoto brought her cup to her lips, letting the soothing green tea slide down her esophagus before she set it down, closing her eyes. "...Suzui-san." she spoke with a clipped tone. There must have been a hidden edge to it as Suzui seemed to freeze up after hearing it. Slowly, Makoto's eyes opened and stared back at her with an eerie calm. "I'll have to apologize. I didn't ask you here about how you're doing in the volleyball team."

Her next words made her feel partially guilty, especially as Suzui's color drained from her face.

"Kamoshida is abusing the volleyball team...isn't he?"

TakeYourTime

Yuuki Mishima hissed slightly as a bag of ice pressed against his swollen eye, in spite of the cloth placed over it. "Just apply pressure for a good half hour or so and the swelling should go down." Akira suggested to him as he went over to the cooler, grabbing a plastic cup and pulling down on the tab. "You okay? That spike must have hurt."

"N-not really." Mishima answered, albeit nervously as Akira returned seconds later, offering him a cup. He bowed his head and accepted it, taking it into his hand. "Um...t-thank you for bringing me here."

Akira waved a hand. "It's fine."

There was no mistaking it. The boy in front of him was the same one

he found back during their second visit in Kamoshida's Palace. In truth, Akira felt a bit sick as there was hardly any difference in appearance between Mishima and Kamoshida's cognition of the poor boy. There was more meat on him, but he was horribly skittish. Don't even get him started on the bruises. He caught several angry black and blue blemishes on his arm when he rolled up his sleeve for a brief moment. He avoided giving the boy a pitiful look, given that it wouldn't help him. Mishima seemed like the type who didn't like pity.

The two simply sat in silence, as if waiting for the other to speak. Instead, Akira merely drank from his own cup. After several seconds of silence, however, his patience paid off. "...why did you agree to help me?" Mishima asked weakly. Akira tilted his head to the side. Thinking he made a blunder, Mishima spluttered out an apology. "I-I mean, you don't have to tell me! It's cool if you don't wanna say..."

"Cause it just seemed like the right thing to do." came the simple answer.

Mishima blinked. It was as if the response was almost foreign to him. "I-I see..." he said slowly. He took a quick drink of his cup before he looked up at Akira again. Unlike before, his nervousness was much more apparent in his voice. "C-Can I...ask you something?" Akira nodded as he drank the last of the cup's contents, tossing it into the trash bin next to him. "Is-is it true that you live with Niijima-senpai?"

That piece of info alarmed him. Inwardly, he narrowed his eyes.

How the hell does he even know that? Akira thought in mild distress. *My record, that can be explained, but not my living situation.*

It was one thing for someone to have access to his record, but it was another thing altogether for someone to have access to his private life. If this information wasn't already out in the ears and mouths of the students, then he didn't doubt it would be long before it did. Just wonderful. He was doing his best not to get Makoto into trouble, and instead it seemed like someone wanted to do it for him.

Dammit...

"I'm living with her because her older sister is my guardian and probation officer." Akira answered, making sure that his irritation wasn't seeping in his tone. "If possible, Mishima-kun, I'd appreciate it if you kept that to yourself. I don't want rumors to start spreading around Makoto-san as well."

Mishima vigorously shook his head. "O-of course not!" he swore. "I promise I won't." Akira nodded in gratitude, and the two were once again in silence. Unlike before, though, it barely lasted more than ten seconds as Mishima spoke up in wonder. "Y-you know...you're nothing like the rumors say." The frizzy-haired teen tilted his head. "You're...quiet. Docile, even. A-are you really as bad as everyone says?"

Akira smirked as he pushed up his glasses. "Oh yeah," he said, trying to muster an evil voice. "I'm really bad. Bad to the bone~"

Mishima blinked. Moments later, he laughed. It hurt for him to do so, due to one of the many hidden bruises underneath his clothes, but he laughed nonetheless. The transfer student was nothing like he imagined. When he learned about his record, he was terrified out of his wits that there might be someone worse than the coach, but talking with him now...it was different. That last line pretty much proved it.

...of course, it only made the immense feeling of guilt in his heart worsen.

"...Mishima." The bruised teen jumped, startled by Akira speaking up so suddenly. He looked up to find a pensive expression on the frizzy-haired teen's face. An expression that left him unnerved. "There's something I want to ask."

"W-what is it?"

Akira's next words made his heart sink.

"Those bruises...those are from Kamoshida, aren't they?" Mishima opened his mouth to speak, but they died when a glare - a cold and sharp glare, far worse than the one Kamoshida often gave him when he gave him that damnable *special training* - dug right into him. He

couldn't even find a voice in his throat. Not a squeak or a yelp. "Don't lie, Mishima. We already know about the abuse."

His eyes widened to the point where they threatened to bulge. This time, he found his voice returning. "Y-you do?!" he shouted a bit more loudly than he would have liked. In fright, he looked around, scared that anyone could be hearing before he leaned forward, lowering his voice in a whisper. "H-how did you find out?"

"You'd have to be an idiot not to notice." Akira responded with a scoff as he rested his chin against his hands. "What I'd like to know is why no one is saying anything." A beat passed before he added, "Unless, of course, you're all masochists."

"W-what?! No!" Mishima shook his head. Where in the hell did he get that idea from?! He then gave a tired sigh as he looked down. Out of all the people to find out...he didn't expect it to be Akira. He was aware that the Student Council President had been calling a lot of people from the volleyball team into the office to ask about something. He wasn't a fool - he knew that she was investigating. Now that he thought about it more, he soon realized it was natural that Akira would also know about it as well, given that he and Makoto were living together and therefore have a lot of contact with each other.

There was no way he could lie or make excuses for Kamoshida. Not with those two.

After several seconds, Mishima mustered up the courage to look at Akira in the eyes, face marred with forlorn. "The reason why no one will say anything...is because *everyone knows* ."

TakeYourTime

Makoto nearly dropped her cup in utter shock. Her eyes were wide with disbelief clearly written across them. "W-what?" she whispered in horror. "W-what do you mean that everyone knows?"

TakeYourTime

"I-I mean..." a member of the volleyball team struggled to find the

right words as his eyes constantly shifted around, looking for anyone who might be listening. Especially a certain teacher. "Everyone already knows about the abuse. The students, the faculty, even the principal and our parents."

Ryuji's face turned red in rage. "Are you shitting me?!" he snarled. The volleyball member flinched as he backed up against the wall, cowering underneath Ryuji's frightful rage. "The eff does that mean?!"

TakeYourTime

"A-at first, Kamoshida wasn't being discreet." Mishima explained nervously. "People noticed right away what was happening. It got worse because Kobayakawa values him. He's Shujin's 'golden goose' as he puts it. B-but, after what happened with Sakamoto and the Track Team, he started to get really careful. He covered up the incident to make it look like Sakamoto attacked him unprovoked. Worse, a lot of the Track Team turned on him. Since then, he keeps the abuse as discreet as possible." The scrawny bundle of nerves clutched the fabric of his pants, grimacing. "The beatings get worse whenever he's in a foul mood..." He gritted his teeth, trying to force out the images that he constantly heard whenever he found himself outside the room of the bastard's office. "...and that's not the worst. All of that...is just for the male students."

Akira's eyes narrowed dangerously. Inside, he felt Arsene let out another wrathful pulse. Anger was beginning to bubble in his heart. Swiftly, however, Orpheus let out a pulse of its own, relieving him of the anger and instead leaving him significantly outraged.

"I-it happens to the girls too." Mishima continued with regret and horror. "B-but...that isn't the worst of what happens to them." He tried to get it out, but he couldn't find the words, nor the strength to do so.

Instead, he broke down. Tears fall from his eyes, unable to lift his head. Akira's face was calm, but within, Orpheus was trying its best to soothe the boiling rage that Arsene constantly released. He pushed up the false glasses sitting on his nose as he stood up, making his way for the door.

"K-Kurusu-san..." Mishima called weakly. He looked over his shoulder and found a sniffling Mishima looking up at him. "K-Kamoshida...he knows Niijima-senpai is investigating. You...you have to be careful."

"...thank you, Mishima-kun."

He stepped out of the Nurse's Office, shutting the door behind him. For the briefest moment, his mask broke and a scowl emerged over his lips.

TakeYourTime

The three had reconvened in the Student Council Room, sharing the info they gathered from those who had the strength to talk, or at least reveal the truth. In the end, the info they obtained was the same.

Out of anger, Ryuji slammed his fist down on the table, utterly livid. "That son of a bitch!" he roared in anger. Above his eye, a vein bulged. "That motherfucking son of a bitch! I can't believe this!"

Makoto could scarcely found a word to describe the situation. It was clear as day how utterly shaken she was by what Shiho told her. For the longest time, she's held nothing but the highest opinion for the faculty of Shujin. To hear that all of them were purposely keeping quiet about Kamoshida's wrongdoings was...it was unbelievable. "You okay?" Akira asked. Makoto looked up, showing how shaken she was with her eyes left downcast, but she eventually gave a nod. He gently placed a hand on her shoulder. "It'll be fine. We'll expose him."

"Damn right we will." Ryuji said strongly, turning to the two. "There's gotta be someone who's willing to talk." He looked away, muttering under his breath. "There's gotta be..."

No one could say anything more. Even now, their thoughts went back to what Morgana told them. By taking the Treasure from the Palace, they could force Kamoshida to confess. At the same time, they would risk him dying through a mental shutdown. The thought alone brought forth an unspoken, almost chilling realization for such

a scenario: If it happened, it would be their fault. They couldn't stand that idea. No matter what, they had to find an alternative.

Strangely, Akira found himself in disagreement. Recently, Arsene's pulses have been growing stronger by the day. He wasn't sure why that was, but it was different than usual. Yes, whenever Arsene let out a pulse, it emboldened his feelings of anger towards Kamoshida - as if tempting him to take action against this cruel injustice. However, at times, these pulses would also become assurance. As if the Persona was telling him that this course of action was the correct one. The Persona was telling him to rob the King of the Castle blind. To take his prized possession and make him atone for his crimes. His hand went up to his chest, grasping it.

That's right. He hadn't forgotten the words and their meaning. *I am thou. Thou art I* . They were one of the same. Arsene was him. His truest feelings.

The decision had to be made...

...at least, soon.

"...it's getting late." he said, ending the silence. "Let's call it a day. We can continue investigating tomorrow."

Ryuji nodded. "Sounds fine by me." he said as he stood up, sliding the chair back into its proper position.

As they left the Student Council Room, Akira stopped Makoto briefly, earning a confused look. "Mishima-kun said that Kamoshida knows we're looking into him." he said, causing her eyes to widen. "We have to be careful." Makoto's eyes steeled, and bobbed her head. They then made their way home.

TO BE CONTINUED...

A/N: A rather short chapter, but required given that I'm setting up some rather heart-wrenching moments. Hope you all enjoy!

14th Heist: Ann Takamaki

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Since time immemorial...they were known as,

"Tricksters."

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

14th Heist: Ann Takamaki

"Welcome back." Sae greeted the two as they entered the living room.

Makoto had already received a text from her older sister, stating that she would be home early for once thanks to her co-worker. As they

expected, they found her at the kitchen table, typing away on her laptop. Even now, she worked on the case with the utmost diligence. "We're back." Makoto announced with a smile. "How was work?"

"Slow." Sae answered in slight distaste. "My case is pretty much over with, though the process is taking longer than it should be." She gave a low groan, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Then again, they're also occupied with cases of their own. Especially with all of these incidents happening." Shaking her head, the woman then offered a small smile as she turned back to the two minors in her care. "So, how was school?"

"Uneventful." Akira shrugged. "The only highlight was getting to see a former Olympic sportsman in action." Though given that said Olympic sportsman was Suguru Kamoshida, he supposed it wasn't worth much. "Other than that, just boring."

Makoto chuckled, shaking her head. "I wouldn't say boring." she said, earning a wry look from Sae and a confused one from Akira. "I heard that Ushimaru-sensei caught you not paying attention and tried to throw chalk at you."

" *Tried* being the keyword here." the frizzy-haired teen corrected with a small smirk. He wasn't quite as dimwitted as the teacher thought he was. Truth be told, he wasn't even really interested in the lecture at all. Perhaps it was negligence of studying on his part, but history had never really interested him much. Maybe if the teacher was a Sengoku nutjob who wore a samurai helmet, then maybe he'd be a little interested in the lecture. "He missed."

"You still shouldn't neglect your studies, Kurusu-kun." Sae chided with a frown. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't mid-terms in three weeks or so?"

Makoto nodded. "Technically next month, but still around the corner." She folded her arms as she glanced at Akira. "I hope your test scores are good enough for you to be slacking off, Akira-kun." There was a subtle hint in her voice as she shut her eyes, a sickly-sweet smile spreading across her face. Suddenly, a cold shudder ran down his spine while Arsene let out a pulse. It wasn't anger or outrage, but rather fear. He understood perfectly why. The look the

Student Council President was giving him was practically the definition of *terror* . "Otherwise, we're going to be having a *very* long talk."

Swallowing whatever pride he might have, lest he face the wrath of a furious woman with a motorcycle for a Persona, he nodded.

Sae rolled her eyes at the sight, returning to her work. *Children.* she thought dismissively. *Worrying about things other than their future in a society like this. Then again, it's good that he has Makoto to keep him straight.*

Perhaps it was callous for her to think this way, but as far as she was concerned, her latest job of being a probation officer, on top of being a guardian, was nothing more than a burden. Yes, she was doing this as a favor, but it was a burden nonetheless. She had her hands full with Makoto, though she at least had a set goal in her mind. She stayed at the top of her classes, even made Student Council President. Compared that to Akira...no, she couldn't think like that. No matter how troublesome this was, it wasn't fair on his part. He just ended up trying to do the right thing, and he paid the price for it. Perhaps it was better that way.

Reality was harsh, and you had to adapt. Sae learned that when she chose to become a Prosecutor. The sexual dominance, the arrogance - all of it was because society and reality were cruel. It could best be likened to Darwinism. You either adapt and survive, or get weeded out and have your future thrown down into the mud. Akira was among the latter group for trying to help a woman.

Why am I even thinking about this?

She realized where her thoughts were heading and shook her head, letting out a quiet sigh. Makoto had told her she was going to study as she went up to her room while Akira went to fix himself some dinner with the leftovers in the fridge. She had more important things to worry about. For starters, the case she had taken upon herself to investigate in spite of the Director saying it wasn't needed. The more righteous part of her, the same part that had caused her trouble by having her accept Akira into her home, couldn't leave this be. The nagging feeling wouldn't go away, no matter how hard she tried. She

needed to investigate this.

The Mental Shutdown cases.

TakeYourTime

As like before since yesterday, morning arrived and went to school while bidding Sae farewell as they left. The morning train was packed as usual with the constant whispers and gossip, though it was hardly anything Akira cared for. Classes went by and before long, lunchbreak had descended. Students fled the room swiftly while some remained, albeit keeping a weary eye on Akira as he left with the others. He didn't like being stuck in one place for too long. Especially a place that felt so stuffy. The courtyard was nice and open with a small table close to a vending machine, so it seemed like a good place to eat. That, and it was the furthest away from large crowds.

On his way there, his phone buzzed. Taking it out of his pocket, he found messages from Ryuji and Makoto.

RS: Dammit, no one is saying anything else! Were they seriously telling the truth that everyone's keeping quiet?!

RS: Why would they do that?!

MN: I don't think they're doing this willingly. With so many abuse victims...it could be that they're scared.

AK: Not only that, but Kamoshida is protected by Kobayakawa.

AK: Even if we do manage to expose him, I don't think the principal would do much.

RS: Such bullshit.

MN: I'll keep looking. There has to be someone who's willing to talk.

Akira frowned. His eyes re-read the message several times before he slipped it inside his pocket. Somewhere, deep inside, he knew that wouldn't be the case. They already learned that everyone knew about the abuse and said nothing. Not only that, but Kamoshida was

aware that they were snooping. He knew what they were doing. That meant he would be taking measures. He'd become more careful. If there was any evidence to be found, Kamoshida would make sure it would be gone before they even had a chance to find it. At this rate, things would continue on.

A pulse from Arsene made him think back to the Metaverse. Despite the threat that Kamoshida might die from it, the act of taking his heart would be the best way to expose him. It might be the only way. The risk was high, yet somehow, he felt certain that this was the best course of action. Yes, it had to be.

Nobody would miss someone like Kamoshida. the dark voice in the back of his mind whispered to him again. *After all he's done, who would cry for someone like that? People would be cheering in joy for someone like that being gone. So what's stopping you? Why don't you take the plunge?*

Why, indeed? What was stopping him? Nobody would miss Kamoshida. They were scared of him. Terrified to death of him. With the way things were, it seemed as if only Akira had the ability to stop him.

...but he couldn't justify it. No matter the reason or how horrible they were, Kamoshida didn't deserve to die. He needed to pay for his sins, but not with his life. Yet, no matter how hard he thought, the idea of taking his heart seemed to be the only way to resolve all of this. Another pulse from Arsene came rumbling through his heart. For a brief moment, he felt his other self's wings wrap around him, as if to comfort him while encouraging him.

Akira sighed. All of this thinking was making him hungry.

He eventually reached the courtyard, though much to his slight disappointment, the spot he wished to rest at was already occupied. The girl who sat in front of him in class was leaning against the table, chewing on a piece of pockey while another girl sat in the bench, eating out of a bento box. Akira winced when he saw her state. She was like a female Mishima - bruises across her face and pale skin. A victim of Kamoshida's abuse. If the somewhat glazed look in her eyes was any indication, he suspected much worse. He

shifted slightly as he watched the two of them from afar, unsure. He could just walk up and ask if he could eat there, though at the same time, he didn't want them to leave because of him.

"Hey, isn't the blonde that Takamaki girl?"

Akira craned his head, finding a few students passing by. Going by their faces, they were obviously leering at the blonde girl.

"Yep, that's her. You know, the girl with the foreign look to her?"

"Damn, she is *fine* ~ She looks easy. Think I could score with her?"

"Dude, are you out of your mind? She's Kamoshida's bitch."

Akira's eyes widened, looking back at the girl - Takamaki. She was...going out with Kamoshida? That...didn't seem right. While he firmly believed that one could not judge a book by its cover, he couldn't help but feel that she didn't seem the type. Curious, he took out his cell and typed up Ryuji.

AK: Ryuji, do you happen to know a girl named Takamaki?

RS: Takamaki?

RS: Oh, you mean Ann! Course I know her.

RS: Why?

AK: I overheard some students talking. They called her "Kamoshida's bitch."

RS: Seriously? That doesn't sound right.

AK: You sure?

RS: I went to middle school with her.

RS: We weren't close, but I know her well enough to know that she wouldn't be interested in a guy like that prick.

So how did that rumor spread? Akira frowned deeply. If what Ryuji said was true, then Takamaki might be another victim of the rumors.

Of course, that brought another question: how did such rumors spread? Was it a circumstance similar to his own? As he fuddled his brow, there was yet another pulse echoing in the back of his mind. To his confusion, it was not from Arsene, but from Orpheus. It was almost as if the Persona was urging him to go to them.

As much as he would have loved to, he couldn't help but feel out of place. If Takamaki was subject to rumors, he had a feeling he'd only make things worse by being seen with her.

...then again, nothing ventured. Nothing gained.

With a nod, he braced himself and walked over. "Excuse me." he called, earning the two girl's attention. "Would it be okay if I ate here?"

"Sure." Takamaki said without hesitation, much to his surprise. It must have showed on his face as she gave a small smile. "What? You thought I wouldn't let you?"

He gave a nod. He honestly expected her to do so, especially given that his record was public knowledge here at school. The bruised girl, however, giggled somewhat. "You don't have to worry." she said to him. "Ann-chan isn't like most people."

"...thank you."

TakeYourTime

"Ann Takamaki?" Makoto repeated the name with confusion as she tilted her head, putting a hand on her chin. "And Akira-kun found this out from a bunch of students?"

"Yeah." Ryuji told her, face written with worry. Admittedly, he hadn't talked to Ann since they graduated middle school, so he wasn't quite close to enough to really consider her a friend. They hadn't spoken at all even though they discovered that they enrolled in the same high school. Then again, after what happened with the Track Team, he supposed he didn't blame her. That said, though, what Akira told him had him concerned. "I mean, yeah, its been a long time since me and Ann talked, but I know her. No way she'd gun for

Kamoshida."

Makoto hummed, closing her eyes. "...now that I think back on it, Kamoshida has been talking with her every chance he gets." she noted, recalling the first day Akira came to Shujin. "Not only that, but I've heard that he's been calling Suzui-san into his office a few times lately. Suzui-san and Takamaki-san are friends, right?"

"More like sisters, but yeah." The former athlete's eyes hardened as a disturbing thought ran through his mind. In response, he felt Captain Kidd bristle, which only amplified his own feelings on the matter. "If that bastard is trying to touch Ann, he's got another thing coming."

"Calm down, Ryuji." the Student Council President advised him, wanting to calm him before he did something reckless. "If Kamoshida is keeping an eye on us, we need to be smart. In the meantime, did you do what I asked?"

The blonde sighed as he shook his head. "Tried to, but that old warhound Ushimaru was around and watching me like a hawk." he said in regret. He then adopted a curious look. "If you don't mind me asking...we sure it's a good idea to be sneaking into his office? I mean, you said it yourself. Kamoshida's gonna be be watching us, so isn't it a bad idea?"

"Perhaps. But it's the last thing he'd expect." Makoto reasoned. "That, and it wouldn't be strange to see a student entering his office if it's for the sake of counseling." She then let out a sigh. "Then again, given yours and Kamoshida's history, I suppose that idea would be a bit out of left field. Sorry for asking you to do that."

"Eh, it's fine. On the plus side, I didn't get busted." he told her. A wide grin then formed on his face. "Hell, who knows? Maybe Kamoshida actually keeps a diary in his desk or something, detailing what he does."

Oh, if we were only so lucky. Makoto lamented, sincerely hoping such a thing would be true. If he truly did keep a record of his activities, it would be child's play to expose him. After all, it paid to have a sister who was a Prosecutor. However, Makoto didn't want to

rely on Sae all of her life. She needed to stand on her own. Make her own path.

If the pulse of encouragement Johanna released inside of her was any indication, she was on the right path. In the meantime, though, it was time to get back into the woodwork.

TakeYourTime

"Sorry if this sounds rude, but..." the bruised girl, Shiho Suzui, spoke up. Akira looked up, finding her gaze focused on him in curiosity. "...a-are you the transfer student?" The frizzy-haired teen blinked, surprised by the abrupt and blunt question. Regardless, he gave a nod. Shiho gave him a worn-out smile, testament to her battered form. "Rumors are cruel, aren't they? Don't worry...I'm sure they'll pass eventually."

Oh, how he wished they would. He wasn't particularly bothered by the rumors as much as one would think, though they could get rather tiresome. Especially with how outlandish or ridiculous they could get. That said, some of the rumors that typically revolved around him were beginning to grow out of hand, what with involving Makoto. He didn't want to cause her any trouble here at school. That said, he was surprised Shiho was showing him such kindness, especially given that they had just met. Perhaps she herself was victim of vicious rumors? Either way, he was thankful for the gesture.

Akira bowed his head in gratitude. "Thank you, Suzui-san."

"I-it's no trouble."

"There you go again." Takamaki rolled her eyes, smiling nonetheless. "Worrying about others." She then turned towards Akira, offering him a smile as well as she extended her hand. "Nice to meet you. I'm Ann Takamaki."

Akira leaned forward, grasping her hand. He immediately noted how small her hand was, as well as how soft. Her fingers were long and thin, curling around his own hand in the greeting. "Kurusu, Akira. A pleasure."

"So, how are you enjoying Shujin? Well, other than the stupid rumors floating around."

He shrugged. "I can deal with the rumors. As for my stay, it's...nice."

He honestly meant that. The campus was large enough to have more than a few spots open without anyone trying to disturb him. Not only that, but perhaps thanks to the rumors, everyone tended to give him a wide birth. No one was willing to go even a foot near him unless they couldn't help it. Of course, he also found that the teachers around him either didn't seem to care much for him as they tended to either pass him over, thus leaving him for the more strict teachers like Ushimaru. The old man once caught him nodding off and attempted to throw a piece of chalk at him.

He was still hearing whispers about how he dodged the throw like a ninja. He was a bit proud of that feat.

"Well, don't let the rumors get to you too much." Takamaki told him as she polished off her pockey stick before going for another one. "Like Shiho said, they'll stop eventually."

No, they won't. Not until that foolish king has been put in his place. a cold voice whispered in his ear. *Surely, you know that by now, don't you?*

Akira tried to ignore it. However, he noted that it's tone was different. He felt a pulse run through his heart, this one different than usual. *Was that...?*

"By the way..." Takamaki continued, bringing him out of his thoughts. "Are you apart of the Student Council? I keep hearing how close you are with Niijima-senpai."

Akira shook his head. "No. Her older sister is my probation officer." he stated, causing both girls' eyes to widen in intrigue and surprise. He refused to elaborate further on the subject, choosing to end the topic quickly. He felt uncomfortable speaking about his situation with others he didn't know very well, even if they showed him kindness. "That, and Makoto-san has been pretty much the only one who hasn't been talking behind my back."

Out of the corner of his eye, Akira spotted a few students nearby, giving him harsh looks. He inwardly cringed, realizing the implications of such stares. He gave a small sigh, confusing the two as they were unaware of its meaning. Come tomorrow, he would have to prepare himself for more rumors. The bell then rang, signalling the end of lunch. "Well, time to head back, I guess." Ann said as she finished her last stick of pockey, slipping the box into her blazer's pocket and getting up from her spot. She turned to Shiho and smiled widely. "I'll see you later, Shiho."

"Mm." Shiho nodded, smiling back weakly as Ann walked away, giving Akira her farewells as she walked away. The two then looked at one another and bowed. "It was...nice, having someone else around other than Ann." she confessed. "Thank you, Kurusu-kun."

Akira waved a hand. "It was no trouble. I'll see you around, Suzui-san." With that, he turned and walked away.

Had he chosen to stay longer, he would have noticed Shiho's face becoming crestfallen as she walked away, making her way to her own class. She looked down at her hands, which began to shake. It had taken everything to keep up this cheerful face in front of Anne and not break it. She wanted to tell her what had been on her mind. What she had been plagued with. However, the bruises choked those pitiful screams for help. They were shackles that reminded her of her place. She bit her lip, thinking back to her last visit to the Consultation Room. She rubbed her arm, which burned in pain. The painkillers were starting to wear off, leaving her sore once again. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she wanted it all to stop. The pain, the torture, the *training...*

She wanted it all to stop.

"S-Suzui-chan." a feeble voice called. Shiho recognized the voice, and what it heralded. Her heart fell deeper into the black abyss as she turned to find Mishima shifting uncomfortably, unable to look her in the eye. He was like all the others, but she didn't hate him. Out of everyone, he was the one who received the more intensive *training* . "K-Kamoshida-sensei wanted to see you in his office."

Nodding her head in sorrow and resignation, she walked past him.

Mishima grit his teeth, hands balling into fists as he got out, just low enough for her hear.

"I'm...so sorry..."

It was honest. He meant every word. For that, she was thankful. However, she could offer no response as she walked towards Kamoshida's office in solemn silence as if going to attend her own funeral. She had to do this. She had to.

For Ann. For her beloved friend.

...but was the pain really worth it?

TakeYourTime

By the look of frustration on Ryuji's face, Akira knew that they were no closer to finding a solution. In the end, the three were left back to square one and thinking of useless ways to reveal the truth. By now, they should have realized it. No one was willing to reveal the truth. They were too frightened - too scared of Kamoshida to say anything. The only real option was staring them dead in the face, but they refused to look at it. They were terrified of the implications and consequences of such actions.

He, however, was beginning to understand that, no matter how horrible or dangerous the idea was...it was beginning to become their only real option.

Akira knew with certainty that, no matter how hard they pursued Kamoshida's paper trail, they would find no one with the courage to speak up. Even if they did...what would happen? It was only a handful of people versus a respected teacher who had the favor of the Principal. Best case scenario, Kamoshida would only be suspended for a few days, maybe a month if they were lucky, but it was temporary solution. Nothing they did would keep Kamoshida from beating his students.

His mind raced back to Shiho Suzui, marred and beaten with bruises. Unconsciously, his hands clenched into tight fists, nails threatening to draw blood.

"Dammit." Ryuji cursed as he kicked at the ground in frustration. "Why isn't anyone willing to talk?!"

Makoto appeared to be equally as frustrated, biting down on her thumb nail. "At this point, I think we've exhausted all of our options." she said. Her tone clearly showed that she wasn't happy about this either. To her, it was the same as admitting defeat. A feeling most uncomfortable to her. "Even if we tried to handle this from another matter, Kamoshida has the support of the entire staff. Even the Principal." She shook her head, crossing her arms and staring down at the ground in shame. "What are we supposed to do?"

Again, the answer was so simple. The problem was that they lacked resolve. They held the power necessary to accomplish this task, but their hearts were weak. He understood that fully. His heart was wavering in indecision as well, unsure of what path to take. Yet each time such indecisive thoughts troubled him, the sight of Shiho Suzui and Yuki Mishima made him think back to Morgana's words. Akira looked at his friends, who had yet to reach the same conclusion he did. They had pushed Morgana's words aside, unwilling to think of it. Part of him wanted to bring it up and try and convince them, but memories of their previous visit came to mind.

Without a Persona, they were left helpless. Swords at the neck and cowering at the prospect of dying. Though they now possessed the will to rebel Kamoshida's distorted reality, they knew the danger that awaited them.

Is this really the best option? Akira questioned his own desires. He held a hand over his chest. Two pulses washed over his wavering heart - one a comforting embrace and the other a rousing and assuring hold. He closed his eyes, envisioning such feelings as his Personas standing behind him. Orpheus with his mechanical limbs holding him, as if to comfort him for the pain that he may endure should he follow through. Arsene with a claw on his shoulder, assuring him that this would be the correct choice.

"Akira-kun?" The aforementioned boy looked up to find Ryuji and Makoto looking at him in concern. "Are you alright? You've been quiet for a while."

He was silent at first. A moment of thinking, then he opened his mouth to reply. "...I'm fine."

Such an answer was unconvincing if the looks he received were any indication. However, they accepted them. Makoto looked at the time displayed on her phone, proceeding to slip it back into her bag. "It's getting late. Let's return to this discussion tomorrow." Ryuji nodded and went his separate way, grinning as he bade the two farewell. As Makoto herself readied to leave, she turned to Akira. "Shall we go?"

"You go on ahead." he told her. "I have something to do." Makoto frowned, clearly suspicious. He waved it off with a small grin. "It's nothing serious. I promise."

"...alright." she relented after a moment, though she was still clearly unsure. "Just don't be late, alright?"

He nodded and watched her leave. Her pace was slow, occasionally giving a brief tilt of the head as if to make certain of something. To continue his ruse, he hid behind the gate. After a minute or so, he removed himself from his hiding place. Makoto was gone, vanished from sight. Akira then gave a quick look around, making sure no one else was around before he removed his cell phone from his pocket. After making sure no one was around again, he opened up the Metaverse Navigator application, giving the necessary inputs.

With a few pushes of the button, the Metaverse began to swallow up reality. Ripples raced across the surroundings, twisting and warping them before forming into the world of cruel desires. Red gloves formed over his hands as his uniform was erased, becoming the familiar attire that reflected his own Persona's gentleman-like motif. A powerful pulse echoed through him once more. This time, he was sure he heard Arsene laughing, having finally seen the fulfillment of this resolve he now bore. Placing his phone in his trousers, he removed himself from the wall and entered the front courtyard of Kamoshida's Castle.

"I figured you'd be the one to make up your mind."

There, waiting for him, almost as if he were expecting him given the smug look on his face, was Morgana, paws crossed over his chest.

"So, have you decided to go through with this?" the cat-like creature asked, making sure to confirm the resolve. "After all, this isn't a game. You could very well lose your life. Furthermore, your teacher might die."

Akira's eyes reflected his determination. "...I'll take the risks."

"Hmph. You've got guts, rookie." Morgana gave a vicious smirk, satisfied with his response. "I'll make a Phantom Thief out of you yet."

That said, Morgana turned, making his way to the infiltration point. Akira then followed, his mind set. He briefly looked up at the castle, half expecting to find Kamoshida in one of the towers, staring him down.

I'm coming for you, Akira promised with a vicious smirk of his own, eyes glowing red. *Your Majesty.*

TO BE CONTINUED...

A/N: I intended to make this chapter longer, but I decided against it, since come next chapter...

..well, you know what to expect. As I was writing the beginning portion, I realized that I hadn't properly introduced Ann and Akira together, or give Shiho some well-needed screentime.

I'd also like to point out a small detail that some of the more keen readers may have picked up: Shiho's thoughts as she was heading to Kamoshida's office. Yes, I had Makoto mention how Kamoshida kept trying to talk to her and that I had entirely skipped the heart-warming and wrenching scene she shared with the protagonist on the day before "you-know-what." Shiho's thoughts explain why Kamoshida hasn't been actively pursuing her so fiercely.

And it'll make the confrontation all the more harsher.

At any rate, we have now reached a small, minor canon divergence point - Akira choosing to pursue Kamoshida himself! Admittedly, his

solo act isn't going to last very long. It's meant to show that, compared to the others, he is living up to how the game was willing to portray him. As Hifumi Togo described him, "a daredevil." He's willing to accept these risks.

Well, that's it for now. Ready your tissues for the harshness that shall be revealed next chapter, as we finally near the endgame of the Kamoshida Arc! Ladies and gentleman, the next chapter shall mark the beginnings of regicide!

With that in mind, I shall see you next heist!

15th Heist: Decision

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Since time immemorial...they were known as,

"Tricksters."

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

15th Heist: Decision

Makoto did not believe what Akira had told her. Something was wrong. His silence after school had left her unnerved. The thoughts had plagued her mind ever since she returned home. Sae was nowhere to be found, so she assumed that she would be late coming home to work. She tried to occupy her thoughts by studying,

but no matter how hard she did so, her mind kept racing back to Akira. His unusual silence during their conversation of what to do with Kamoshida (not that it wasn't unusual for him. As Makoto quickly learned, he was rather quiet and soft-spoken), and that expression on his face when theyvleft...something about it didn't sit right with her.

Try as hard as she might, the Student Council President was unable to shake this unsettling feeling.

She glanced at the cat-themed clock sitting at her desk, her brow furrowing further. "It's late." she remarked quietly as she set her pencil down. "He should be home by now." Sighing, she pinched the bridge of her nose, standing up. She needed to cool off her head. She pushed her chair back into her desk and opened the door, shutting it behind her. Just as she was about to move from her spot, however, she found a startling sight.

Akira, panting and groaning, leaning against the wall for support with labored breathing.

"Akira-kun!" Makoto cried as she rushed to his side. His legs wobbled and threatened to give out. She reached him just as they did, wrapping her arms around his waist. He gave a low cry, feeling an immense soreness in his side as the girl helped him stand up straight. Seeing his look of pain had only made her fear increase. "A-are you okay?! What happened?!"

He didn't answer. He didn't need to. The dots began to connect in her head. She had seen him like this before - after they returned from their second visit in the Metaverse. There was no injuries from what she found, yet the way he cringed and groaned from the touch was a sure sign he had taken a heavy beating. His silence from before. His awkward answer to her before she left. Their conversation with Morgana in the Metaverse when she and Ryuji awoke to their Personas.

The answer became clear, and her eyes widened. "Y-you didn't...!" she whispered, horrified. Akira gave her a sheepish, apologetic look as he tried to pry her arms away, as if trying to state that he was fine. However, she refused to relinquish her hold when she saw his

body shake. "Akira-kun, please don't tell me you...!"

Akira still had yet to answer. Instead, a familiar voice spoke up. "As much as I would like to see two young lovers bicker, can't you get him to his room already?" Makoto looked down at his bag, which shook as a feline creature emerged from the opening. It was the size of the average house cat, bearing midnight black fur with a yellow collar and white paws, along with strikingly familiar bright blue eyes. "He's taken quite a heavy beating."

Makoto gawked. *A-a talking cat?!* That-that didn't even make sense! How was a cat-

...wait. It couldn't be!

"M-Morgana?!"

The cat quirked one of the brows, giving her a look of disbelief. "Who else?" it asked, it's cocky and condescending tone perfectly matching that of the cat-like creature from Kamoshida's Palace. "Now, can you get him to his room or what? I wasn't kidding about the beating."

She had several questions floating around in her mind, but Akira's grunts of pain had reminded her of his condition. She helped steady him as they made their way to his door. Morgana ducked his head into the bag, squirming around before he popped out with a key in his mouth. Makoto took it and inserted it in the keyhole, unlocking it and swinging it open. She then set Akira down on his bed, which he reclined in gratefully as she fell on his back, wincing and coughing as he rubbed his sides. Morgana then leaped out of his bag, taking a seat on the nearby desk, taking the moment to look around.

"Hm, not a bad place." he said with approval. "I like it."

Makoto's fiery glare shut him up instantly. " *Explain* ." she growled, tone hot. " *Now* ."

"What's there to say?" Akira groaned out as he undid his tie. It felt like it was strangling him. His jacket felt uncomfortable so he took it off, throwing it to the edge of the bed. "I went into the

Metaverse...and I got my ass handed to me."

"I can see that!" she shouted. "I want to know why!" She bit her lip in frustration. She was trying to calm herself as was Johanna, who sent out soothing waves, but even they could barely keep her temper under control. "Morgana told us what might happen if we try and take his Treasure! So why did you...?!" Akira looked away, something that only made her more angry. She stomped her foot on the ground. "Look me in the eye, Akira-kun!"

Morgana frowned, sitting down with his tail curling around his hind legs. "From what I heard, you've tried to expose Kamoshida by talking with the students at Shujin, right?" Makoto whipped her head, red eyes narrowing as she gave a nod. At this, the feline shook his head. "You do realize how pointless that is, right?"

"What?!"

"Think about it." Morgana said firmly. "The Principal of your school wants to keep him around. The teachers and students already know about the abuse, but are too afraid to say anything. Let's say you manage to expose him. Find evidence. The best that would happen is the Principal would force him to go on leave for a while." Blue eyes closed, shaking his head sadly. "Moreover, I wouldn't be surprised if the Principal and the faculty found a way to try and cover up a possible scandal."

Makoto winced. Morgana had brought up good points. However, she still looked unconvinced by this decision. "But...you said so yourself! If we take his Treasure, Kamoshida might-!"

" *Might* ." Morgana cut her off mid-sentence. "I said, *might* . There's no real guarantee he might actually suffer a mental shutdown." He gave another sigh before his tone turned grave. "Besides, at this point...I think this might be your only option."

An unsettling shiver ran down Makoto's spine. Something about Morgana's words had left her unnerved. His tone also suggested something else. "What...do you mean?"

"...in the Palace, I saw Kamoshida's Shadow." Akira told her,

bringing her gaze to him. His tired eyes were hidden somewhat by his bangs, giving him a tired and worn-out appearance. Beneath his dark locks of hair, she saw that his eyes were empty, yet smoldering with something fiery. "He was...with a cognition of Suzui-san."

Her heart sank.

"...what did he do?" she asked quietly. The boy did not answer. "Akira-kun." she pressed, her voice so low it may as well have been a whisper. "What did...he do?"

His hands curled into tight fists, shaking. His nails dug into his palms, threatening to draw blood. Though his face was one of utter calm, his shoulders were trembling. Within, he felt a pulse of outrage from both Arsene and Orpheus - the latter of which could not deny its own wrath. The normally calm and soothing source that kept Arsene's more violent outbursts in check was now enraged and horrified by what Akira had witnessed.

Slowly, he answered her.

"She...wasn't wearing anything. There were cuts. Burns. Bruises all over...strapped to a wall."

All color from Makoto's face drained. A hand covered her mouth. Horror was written across her body, her mind already imagining what Akira could have seen. Her heart ached, unable to bear the sorrow. Tears were beginning to prick her face. Morgana closed his eyes, lowering his head. "What happens in the Palace usually reflects its owner's thoughts." he said somberly. "From what Akira has told me, whenever he's in a really foul mood, the abuse on his students is worse, right? If he did that to this Suzui girl..."

It was better left unsaid, for the knowledge of what may come to pass was already engraved into her mind.

For once, Makoto could not bring herself to sleep, for each time she came to close her eyes, she imagined the pain and horror that Shiho Suzui felt.

TakeYourTime

In the morning, just before class was to begin, Makoto and Akira had found Ryuji waiting for them at the front gates. An impressive sight, given that it was Ushimaru at the gates today, barking at anyone unfortunate enough to be caught in his ire. Unlike before, they met at the school rooftop. Normally, it was meant to be locked, but as Akira learned, a student often came up here to tend the plants. Scattered about the place were pots filled with greenery. It was very quiet and peaceful, leaving him to make a mental note to come up here for peace and quiet when the teachers weren't hounding around.

"What?!" After telling Ryuji of his exploits, Ryuji looked more than a little shocked or pissed. "Were you out of your mind or something, Akira?! Kamoshida dying aside, you saw how dangerous those Shadow things are!"

The throbbing pain in his arm was a reminder of how right the blonde delinquent was. However, that did nothing to lessen the steel resolve in his eyes. "I know...but what choice do we have?" he asked, stunning him into silence. "Kobayakawa knows Kamoshida is rotten and molesting his students, but he keeps him around to bolster Shujin's reputation. Even if we have evidence, what would he do?"

"H-he...!" Struggling, Ryuji scowled, kicking the ground. "...he'd just sweep it all under the rug."

Makoto bit her lip, rubbing her arm. "Is...stealing his Treasure our only option?"

"At this point, I'd say so." Morgana nodded, sitting atop a desk. He was still a bit grouchy at Ryuji since it took him so long to figure out it was actually him. Honestly, how slow was his brain? Moreover, why was he insisting on calling him a cat? "Unless you have a better idea."

The two students were left unable to find an appropriate answer. Their only solution was a possibility of Kamoshida dead. Yes, he was scum, but he didn't deserve to die because of it. Akira, however, had long made his decision. After seeing what his Shadow self did to the cognition of Suzui, he was more than tempted to rush

in and cut him down right there. Though it wasn't the real Shiho Suzui, it still made his blood boil. Even now, he felt his personas cry out in rage.

Soon, they would be able to let loose their frustrations. As would he.

"...whether or not you guys are up for it is up to you." he said to them, pushing up his glasses. "As for me, I've made my decision."

Ryuji frowned. "And what if Kamoshida kicks the bucket?"

"Then I take responsibility for it." came the simple and swift answer. "After all, don't we have to take responsibility for our actions?" His words left them quiet. Morgana, for his part, looked impressed by his resolve. If Kamoshida was to die, then he would take the fall. If he were honest, he would prefer it if they didn't get involved. He took out his phone, quickly checking the time. "Class is going to start soon. We should get going."

The blonde gave him a look. "How in the hell can you worry about class...?" he muttered in confusion before scratching the back of his head. "Mnrgh...fine. Let's go."

Begrudgingly leaving the topic alone, the three left the rooftop.

TakeYourTime

It was well in the afternoon, and Makoto still couldn't wrap her head around the craziness that had been her week. It had first begun with a world made of desires and Kamoshida's true self being unveiled, and then Personas and then Kamoshida's actions coming to light.

In her view, the whole situation was horrible. She took her studies seriously. She wished to get into a good college and lessen her sister's burden. She wanted to become a police officer like her father. As of lately, she also wanted to help Akira. The boy had gone through so much - having his future more or less taken from him and all. Now, though...she found herself questioning her own usefulness.

Kamoshida couldn't be touched. They couldn't gather evidence and report him. The police wouldn't believe a bunch of children. Kobayakawa would cover up a scandal that could hurt Shujin's

reputation. The only way to bring an end to this whole thing was a solution that may or may not end in the death of her own instructor.

Why am I even thinking about this? she thought, biting her lip as he grasp over the document Hiruta-sensei asked her to deliver. *If we just use our heads, maybe we could...oh, what am I doing? I don't even know what to do anymore.* She sighed softly. The soothing pleasant wave Johanna pulsed through her did little to ease her worries. *Even if Akira-kun and Morgana are right...*

"N-Niijima-kaichou?"

Makoto removed herself from her worries, turning to find Suzui just close to the stairwell leading up to the third floor. "Suzui-chan?" she asked. Her mind raced back to what Akira told her in Kamoshida's Palace and squashed down the horrible feeling she felt. "What are you doing up here? Shouldn't you be in class?"

"I'm...not feeling well." And she didn't. Her face was pale, the rings under her eyes looked even worse than before, and her whole body looked like it was shuddering. At this moment before her, she looked so frail and helpless. "I-I asked my teacher for some fresh air."

Makoto's eyes softened. "I see..."

"Are...you okay, Niijima-kaichou?"

"Eh?"

"You looked like you were deep in thought about something." Suzui told her, tilting her head. "Is everything okay...?"

No, it isn't. she wanted to say so badly. She wanted to so badly apologize to her about everything. About not noticing the abuse sooner. *Kamoshida, no matter what we do, will walk scotch free of any punishment. The best we can do is just give him a slap on the wrist.*

But she couldn't say any of that. All she could do was put on a fake smile and shake her head. "It isn't anything to worry about." she told her, waving a hand. "I suppose I'm just...dueling any unpleasant thoughts. What about you? Will you be okay?"

For a moment, Suzui's face faltered. It looked ready to crumble any moment now. It vanished quickly. "...I'm fine. Thank you for worrying."

"Are you sure?" Makoto pressed. The mental image crafted last night echoed vividly in her mind. "Listen...if you have any problems, or if...you need anyone to talk to...the Student Council's doors are open."

She could faintly see Suzui's lips trembling. Her hands were shaking madly at her side. Her eyes were so painful. Within, she saw a girl begging for help. However, her words betrayed her true self. "...thank you, senpai." With that, she vanished up the stairs.

Makoto, however, could not shake this feeling of trepidation that beat in her chest. Something was going to happen. Something horrible. Part of her wanted to race up the stairs and catch her. Why would Suzui go to the third floor for a breath of fresh air? That didn't seem right. In the end, Makoto sighed, bowing her head and trudging forward.

TakeYourTime

Ushimaru's lecture on social studies was as disinteresting and bland as usual. Thankfully, his attention was turned directly to the board so he didn't catch Akira looking out the window, hand on his chin. Of course, the real kicker was inside the desk. Had a student noticed it, they would have found a black ball of fur hiding out inside, tail hanging out with a snout poking its head to peek about the classroom.

"Good god, what kind of place *is* Shujin?" Morgana questioned in utter disbelief. "Stuck in a room for nearly an hour, listening to someone ramble while writing down what he says...this sounds more like prison than an academy!"

Akira had to repress a snort, glad to see that the two agreed on what Shujin really felt like.

"Anyway...our infiltration last time proceeded quite smoothly." the cat-like being said, keeping his voice hushed. They were not sure if

normal people could understand him, given his strange nature, but regardless of whether or not they could hear him, Akira needed him to keep quiet. Last thing he needed was Ushimaru digging into him. And, of course, Morgana being thrown to the shelter. "I think I have a pretty good idea where we can find the Treasure. Our problem right now is, of course, the lack of manpower. Your powers to control more than one Persona is impressive, rookie, but the two of us alone can't break through tight security. I think you know that, too."

Of course he did. The two of them alone wouldn't be able to make it to the Treasure. The pain from yesterday was proof of that. Arsene's control over that dark energy - Eiha - was quite impressive, as was Orpheus' ability to throw fireballs - Agi - left and right while offering up a soothing wave of healing, but even with Morgana's own Persona controlling winds - Garu - like they were nothing and also healing them whenever things got rough, it was still hard to handle so many powerful opponents. Not only that, but the guards protecting the Treasure would naturally be far more powerful than normal.

"I know." Akira whispered back. "But I don't like the idea of Ryuji or Makoto risking their lives."

"Maybe." Morgana shrugged. "But they have Personas, just like you do. Their assistance would be invaluable." His ears curved, shaking his head with a disappointed sigh. "But I guess it's to be expected. They still can't bring themselves to try and think positive. Are all people like this?"

"Of course they are." he retorted with a frown. The clouds were dark and gray, looking ready to pour rain any second. "A lot of people would rather watch something happen and not do anything to resolve it, help bring an end to it or make things worse. In the first case, its usually because of morals, personal experience or lack of courage."

Ryuji, in spite of the torture and ridicule Kamoshida caused him, only wanted to get back at him to the point where the man himself would lose all face. Death was a step too far. Makoto was driven by a strong sense of justice. She didn't want to kill someone - she wanted someone to take responsibility for what they've done.

As for him...Kamoshida just reminded him of that bald asshole who got him into probation in the first place.

"Fucking brat...I'll sue you for this!"

Arsene released a pulse, coupled with a sickening laugh as the image of that man thrown to the floor, head plastered against the ground with him at his feet came to mind. His hands shook, fingers curling while repressing any sense of satisfaction he would feel in that moment should it ever come to pass. His memory of the man's face was still blurry - he couldn't remember him all that well. At best, he remembered the man's orange sunglasses and how he reeked of alcohol.

He shook his head, black locks swaying comically. Now wasn't the time to be thinking about petty grudges. "Can we reach the Treasure today, do you think?"

"That all depends." Morgana eyed his form, as if able to see past the flesh and bone and find bruises. "Is your body ready for another beatdown?" He gave a wry look, an eyebrow higher than his longest whisker. "Just so you know, my arm is still sore after Zorro had his cut off."

Akira smiled wryly.

We have to reach Kamoshida's treasure. What happened in the Palace yesterday still has me on edge. I hope Suzui-san is okay...

"Why isn't Shiho answering any of my texts?" Perking up his ears, Akira turned his head to see Ann's reflect in the window. Her face was troubled, staring at her phone. "I know we're in the middle of class, but..."

Suddenly, a student shot out of their seat. In response to the quick action, their chair clattered to the floor. Both the scraping of it being pushed back so suddenly it clattering to the floor had caused Ushimaru's chalk to break slightly. A small chunk broke off, hitting the floor. Scowling, the stern instructor turned to find the source. "Mishima! Back in your seat!"

Mishima's face was one of utter terror as he looked out the window. His bruised face was devoid of any color. His body was shaking like a leaf. "Oh no..."

The class followed his gaze. In seconds, many had rushed up to the windows. From the surrounding classrooms, many had also forgone the lecture and rushed to the nearest window. Akira and Ann looked on in horror.

Standing outside the fence on the rooftop was a girl with a brace around her knee and her black hair tied back into a ponytail.

Shiho Suzui.

"Shiho!" Ann cried, throwing a window open and sticking her head out. Her voice was roaring out in haste, rising several octaves. "What are you doing?! Get down from there!"

From below, Suzui looked down. A sad smile formed across her face. Her heart was hurting. Her body shook against the cold breeze. She faintly felt a droplet of water fall atop her nose. "Ann-chan..." she whispered as a tear slid down her cheek, dripping off her chin and falling to the ground below. "I'm sorry."

It was so faint that she could barely hear her own words. With a trembling lip and a rapidly beating heart, she took a step forward...

" **SHIHO! ! !** "

...and fell.

TakeYourTime

Only seconds after her body hit the ground did Akira's brain reboot. When it did, he shoved his classmates out of the way. His feet were pounding against the floor, tearing the door open and charging his way through the halls. His heart was ramming against his chest. The soothing pulses of Orpheus did nothing.

"Akira!" As he skidded around a corner, he found Ryuji over by the stairwell, waving a hand with an expression similar to his own. "Over here!" The two were already rushing down the staircase by the time

Akira reached his friend. Ryuji's eyes were narrowed, his teeth bared and clenched tightly, hands balled into fists. "Dammit all! What the actual fuck man?!" he cursed. They reached the first floor and rounded towards the courtyard. "Why would Suzui-san jump?!"

He knew the answer. He should have known. The Palace had practically foretold her fate. The cognition of Suzui chained to a wall. Kamoshida in front of her - pink speedo at his ankles and cape gone. The girl whimpering and crying with her skirt and panties on the floor.

I should have known this would happen! Akira shut his eyes as he ran, guilt burning in his heart. *I should have seen this coming! God dammit!*

By the time he opened them again, they were already in the courtyard. A mass of students were gathered around. A teacher was trying to fruitlessly get them to head back to class, but they didn't listen. Like bystanders watching a car wreck. Some had their founds out, but none had them at their ears. Instead, they were aimed at the sight of Suzui's unmoving body. The mere sight brought forth rage to Akira. Their faces overlapped with that of a woman - standing by as police officers grabbed him by the arms and pulling him away, face turned away.

All these idiots...!

"Shiho!" Ann's cries caused the crowd to part like the seas as she barreled her way through, sliding to her dearest friend's side. "Shiho!"

Weakly, Suzui turned her head. There was barely any life in those pale dark eyes of hers. "A...nn...chan..."

Tears openly fell from the blonde girl's face, clasping one of Suzui's hands in her own. "W-why?!" she croaked, barely able to believe that it was her friend who took the plunge. Her heart was shaking, just a hair away from breaking. "Why did you...?"

"I...m...sorry..." Suzui coughed. Her chest felt so heavy. She felt something crawling the back of her mind, beckoning her to a sweet,

cold embrace. "I...couldn't take it...anymore..."

"S-Shiho..."

Ryuji's shoulders were shaking. "T-that sick son of a bitch!" he snarled, eyes burning red as he rounded on his feet. "He is not getting away with this!"

"Ryuji!" Akira shouted as he chased after him. "Where are you going?!"

The crowd continued to watch, both in confusion and in sorrow. Makoto's body shook uncontrollably, no matter how tightly she squeezed her arms. Her legs threatened to give out beneath her as she laid against the wall, biting her lip. "T-this is..." she whimpered. She should have seen the signs. She noticed them, but all she did was give out meaningless words. She should have followed her heart. Instead, all she did was let that girl go up to the rooftop. "This is...all my fault..."

Mishima was not as strong as the Student Council President was. His legs gave way underneath him and he fell to the ground, cradling his head as his tears flooded down his face. Cold, harsh whispers echoed in his ears.

"Your fault." Shiho Suzui told him with her dead eyes. *"All your fault."*

TakeYourTime

"Ryuji, stop-!"

The blonde delinquent didn't listen. He practically ripped off the hinges to the PE Consultation room as he threw the door open. Inside was Kamoshida at his desk, pencil in hand. "Sakamoto?" the man furrowed his brow, standing from his seat. "What do you want?"

"You **FUCKER** !" He rushed at the PE teacher, only for Akira to wrap his arms around his waist, pulling him back. "Lemme go, Akira! I'm gonna bash in his face!"

"Calm down, dammit!" Akira snarled, pulling his friend away with all

of his might. He knew that all it would take is one punch, and Kamoshida would be wearing a smug grin on his face. After six seconds of struggling, he managed to pull Ryuji away. His left side burned in pain, still reeling from the Palace misadventure from yesterday. He then leveled a glare at Kamoshida, who looked rather confused by the commotion. "Kamoshida...we know what you did."

An eyebrow joined his hairline, folding his arms. "And what does that mean, Kurusu-kun?" Kamoshida huffed. "Enlighten me."

"Don't joke around with us, you son of a bitch!" Ryuji shouted at the top of his lungs. "You *raped* that poor girl!"

"That's a rather serious accusation, don't you think?" Kamoshida asked, putting a hand at his hip. "And where exactly is your proof?" The blonde didn't answer. Only a look of righteous fury was clear on his face was the only response. Seeing this, the man laughed. "As I thought. Honestly, Sakamoto-kun...you really need to learn how to control that temper of yours."

"You think this is funny?! A girl just jumped off the roof!"

The corrupt teacher scoffed. "Yes, I'm fully aware. I was with the students watching it happen. A shame, too. Then again, what do you expect from a girl like her?" He gave a small sigh of sadness - a blatantly fake one at that - as he palmed his temples. "Suzui had a starter position for the nationals, and yet she goes and does this."

Akira's nails dug into his skin. Blood began to drip from his knuckles. "...you really don't care if a student dies, do you?" he whispered, bangs hiding his rage-filled eyes. "You abuse your students, molest any girl you want to force yourself upon...and all you care about is yourself." Slowly, he lifted his head, revealing his eyes which burned with rage. "You...really are the worst of the worst, Kamoshida...!"

"Please." the man rolled his eyes. "As if I need some criminal ridiculing me. Besides, what can you do? Let's say I *did* do what you said. I did molest my female students and abuse the rest of the student body. I did rape Shiho Suzui...what would you do?"

Ryuji was taken aback. "W-what?!"

"I'm saying, what would you do?" Kamoshida repeated. "There's no one who would believe you. You're the kid who brutally beat a man without provocation, and Sakamoto-kun here attacked me. Who's going to take your side? Niijima?" He reared his head back, laughing. "That girl is useless. Yes, she's the Student Council President, but what real power does she have? The worst she could do is run behind her sister begging for help. And even *she* can't do anything."

He leaned forward. For a moment, his image synced together with his own Shadow self - dark brown eyes consumed by golden pools of malice.

"Don't you understand yet, you defiant piece of garbage? I *own* this school. Not Kobayakawa...me. So go ahead, do what you want. It won't matter in the least. After all..." A cold smirk formed across his face, tapping his forehead. "You're *powerless* ."

Ryuji's face turned scarlet. His fists shook. He took a step forward, intending on giving the bastard in front of him a good beat down. "Y-you motherf-!"

A hand pushed against his chest. Stunned, he looked at Akira, who lost the rage that danced rampantly in his eyes. Instead, a newfound calm wrapped around his heart. A pulse echoed through his being - stronger than anything he's ever felt. Within his subconscious, a boisterous, booming laugh echoed within.

The laugh of his other self.

Arsene .

"...understood then, Kamoshida-sensei." he said, much to Ryuji's shock. He adjusted the glasses on his face. The delinquent could have sworn - no. He knew for a **fact** that a smirk had just formed on Akira's face, but disappeared no sooner than it had appeared. "We'll be leaving. Sorry for the commotion." With a bow of his head, he turned on his heel. He paused in mid-step, however, before he craned his head.

This time, he couldn't hold it back. He enjoyed the startled look on

Kamoshida's face when he saw the smirk in full splendor - unbound and unleashed.

"Also...thank you for your permission, *Your Majesty* ."

Akira then walked away, a stupefied Ryuji following after him. Kamoshida watched him leave, stunned by his declaration. In his heart, uncertainty and fear began to take root. A scowl formed on his face, shaking his head. No matter however hard he tried, though, the feeling of terror that began to grab hold wouldn't stop.

In that one instant, Akira Kurusu *terrified* him.

"...that little fucking brat!"

TakeYourTime

Because of Shiho Suzui's suicide attempt, school had come to an end prematurely. The students were ordered to leave for home immediately. Paramedics arrived minutes after Suzui jumped. The two had seen her being carried away on a stretcher, hoisted into the ambulance before it drove off, siren wailing.

"You okay, Makoto?" Morgana asked in concern. The boys saw how shaken up she was. She was trembling slightly, and her eyes were puffy. "You...don't look too good."

"I-I..." she struggled to wave off their concerns. She wanted to tell them she was fine..but Johanna wanted her to be honest. And she was. She felt herself breaking apart. "A few minutes before she jumped, I...I met her in the hallway." Akira and Ryuji's eyes widened, now understanding why Makoto looked so horrible. "She...she looked so *dead* to the world. She told me she wasn't feeling too good." She looked up at the two, tears already on the verge of falling from her face. "I watched her head to the third floor...I could have stopped her, Akira-kun. I-I could have...I could have...!"

Just as she was about to break down pathetically before them, two hands gently touched her shoulders. A jolt ran through her body, looking up to find them next to her. "We're not blaming you, Prez." Ryuji told her. He wanted to just crack a joke. Ease the

atmosphere...but Makoto looked ready to fall apart any second now. "I don't think anyone could have stopped her." He gritted his teeth. Just remembering what Akira told him and hearing Kamoshida just wave it off as if it was hardly of any concern to him merely brought forth outrage. Outrage bolstered by his own Persona. It knew what had to be done.

And he was finally ready to take the leap.

"...and Kamoshida's gonna pay for what he's done." Makoto rubbed her eyes, wiping away the tears that had yet to fall to see him looking at Akira, who already understood what he wished. "I'm coming with you." He bared his fangs, banging a fist against the brick wall behind him. "After what that asshole did...I don't care what happens to him at this point. He is going to. Fucking. Pay."

"...I'm coming, too."

Akira turned. To his surprise, Makoto's eyes turned steely. "When I got my Persona, it told me to never lose sight of my own justice. I was so helpless, watching you and Morgana fight. I felt...useless. Even now, I still feel that way." The hand at her chest coiled tightly as her red eyes burned. "But now...I don't want to be. I want Kamoshida to pay for what he's done."

"Are you sure?" Akira asked, narrowing his eyes. "We know the risks. We might kill him, you know." The determination in Makoto's eyes never faded. Seeing this only made Arsene all the more amused. Akira chuckled as he adjusted his glasses again. How odd they seemed to slip off during tense moments. "Alright then."

It was official now. The three of them were going to take their first steps into hell for what they were about to do. Even if it meant taking the life of a teacher...they were going to make him repent for his sins.

"...are you guys talking about Kamoshida?"

Blinking, the three turned to find Ann standing outside the entrance to the alleyway. Her face was pale. Her eyes were puffy from bawling. Her bangs were hiding her eyes. Beneath them, however...

...was a smoldering fury.

"I want in."

TO BE CONTINUED...

A/N: ...normally, I'd offer an excuse, but I'll just say it now. This chapter is late because I was procrastinating, I was playing video games, and working on other stories while making new ones. So sue me for my creative juices. Oh, and watching anime. That too.

At any rate, my friends, we are now approaching the endgame of the Kamoshida Arc! Shocking, right? I said was aiming for a canon divergence, so naturally heists might be shorter. In the game, Kamoshida was to expel Ryuji and hero-kun at the next faculty meeting - which coincided with Kobayakwa's assembly meeting. Here, the expulsion is going to happen a bit earlier than expected. This is necessary for what I have planned, actually.

Also...I lied. I do have a reason for this chapter being so late. Its *Shiho Suzui* . One of the saddest characters in the whole fucking game. Let me tell you, writing the emotional feel of what is, by far, the most emotional and feels-hitting moment of this game is a BITCH to get through without tearing up. The only reason I was able to get through it was because of Black Fuego wrapping up the Kamoshida Palace earlier today in Trials of the Trickster, chocolate milk, and RWBY.

Speaking of which, just watched the first episode of Volume 5. Highlight of that episode was Qrow getting drunk, hands down.

Well, to wrap up this note, the next chapter will feature Ann Takamaki's awakening and the unofficial formation of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts! Be prepared, my fellow thieves, for the greatest thieves known to gaming history are on the horizon!

With that in mind, I shall see you next heist! Peace out!

16th Heist: The First Step

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Since time immemorial...they were known as,

"Tricksters."

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

16th Heist: The First Step

"I want in."

The three words put them on edge. Ann's face was deadly serious, eyes lit aflame like something fierce. They turned to one another, unsure of what to say. Makoto was the first to speak up, eyes narrowed with soft concern. For both their sakes and hers. "How much did you hear?"

"Enough." Ann replied. Akira could tell by the look on her face that she was angry. "Enough to want to know that sick bastard needs to pay." She clenched her teeth, lowering her head as her shoulders trembled uncontrollably. "Before she passed out from the pain... I heard Shiho mutter his name. And when the teachers told us to go back to class while the paramedics took her away... Mishima told me everything."

The three were surprised. It soon faded in sorrow. Akira looked at Ann, unsure what he could say to make the situation better or how he could alleviate her worries, if it was even possible. After all, she had been told the horrible truth of what had happened to Shiho. What she had to endure for so long. The silence.

No one should have to learn any of this.

What made it even worse was that, deep down, Akira knew he could have somehow stopped this. He had seen the signs. Witnessing Kamoshida's Shadow raping the cognition of the poor girl. Even now the horrible excuse of a human being's cackling laughter rung in his ears, as if to mock him. A soothing wave from Orpheus ceased such depressing thoughts, but it still hurt.

"And..." Ryuji swallowed the lump in his throat. "Did they say...what's happening with Suzui?"

Ann choked, tears openly falling from her face. "I-I got a call from the hospital a few minutes ago." she sobbed, trying and failing to wipe the tears away. They wouldn't stop. "They said her injuries are bad. R-really bad. They...they don't think she might make it through the night."

Makoto gasped in fright, holding a hand to her mouth. Akira and Ryuji were stunned into silence. Her injuries were that severe? Yes, she fell from a three-story building rooftop, but even still...

"...I overheard you guys talking about Kamoshida." Ann said. After a minute, she had finally dried her tears and looked at them with fury burning. A fury that resonated with Akira. A fury that so closely resembled what he felt when he relived the experience that put him under probation. "Whatever you guys have planned, I want in. I want

that sick bastard to pay for what he's done!"

Makoto looked at the boys uneasily. Under any other circumstance, they would gladly accept the help. Especially with the task they were undertaking. However, these were not ordinary circumstances. They were going to be in a world of pain, fighting for dear life to expose Kamoshida's crimes. The Castle was a dangerous place where the three of them barely escaped their lives the first time. If Akira hadn't awakened to his Persona and met Morganna, then they would be dead. While the three of them had Personas now, Ann didn't, making it all the more dangerous to her.

Of course, even with Personas, it was still dangerous. Akira was so painfully reminded of that by the soreness in his body - the results of Arsene and Orpheus being pounded and beaten to high heaven.

Ryuji sighed, scratching the back of his head before he looked at Ann. "Look, Takamaki. We get it. You hate Kamoshida just as badly as we do. But what we're going to do...it's way too dangerous."

"I don't care." Ann remained stubborn. "I'm coming with."

"This isn't a game, you know!" Ryuji snapped. "We know what you're going through, but-!"

"You don't know shit what I'm going through!" Ann shouted in retaliation, causing Ryuji's eyes to widen as he backpedaled, startled by her outburst. As a result of her shout, she had also slightly drawn in a few number of students approaching.

"You have no idea what it feels like, Ryuji!" she said as the tears flowed even greater force than before. Her whole body was shaking, shoulders trembling uncontrollably and her coiled fists clutching to the hem of the blazer. "Shiho's in the hospital, fighting for dear life! I don't know if she'll be okay, if she'll even be alright when she wakes up, or-or if she even wakes up at all!" Akira looked on at her as she continued to cry, biting her lip as if trying to stop the tears. "Do you have any idea how that feels? This...helplessness, as your friend is dying and you can't do shit?!"

Ryuji turned away. There was no way to answer that. How could

anyone hope to answer such a heartbreaking question? Certainly not one of them. Her words were true. None of them had ever watched their closest friend try to commit suicide. The teen knew that her grief was great. Perhaps enough that she might take action on her own. It would be better if they did take her with them. Of course, that would make their job harder, having to fight the Shadows whilst also protecting her. Kamoshida had certainly made it no secret that he was gunning for Ann, but why? More concerning, what would his Shadow do if he ever got his hands on her?

"Akira-kun..." Makoto whispered to him, looking to him for an answer to this situation. She also eyed the group of onlookers wearily. If this continued, they would be attracting some unwanted attention. "What do we do?"

Akira closed his eyes, trying to think. He mulled it over for a few more seconds before he sighed and adjusted his glasses. "...okay. You can come with." Ryuji looked at him as if he were insane. Ann's face brightened almost immediately, a grateful smile spreading across her face while she wiped away the tears on her cheeks. "But you have to stay with us, alright? No running off on your own."

"O-okay. Thank you, Kurusu-kun!"

"H-hey, hey. We sure about this?" the blonde delinquent asked, concerned. "I mean, that place is no joke."

"Don't worry." Morgana chimed as he popped his head out from Akra's bag. This surprised Ann, not expecting him to have a cat in his bag before watching the not-cat creature hop out, leaping on top of a nearby trash can, looking at the three Persona-users. "There's four of us here. So long as this ojou-sama sticks with us, I'm sure it won't be a problem." He then chuckled. "At the very least, having the two of you along will make reaching the treasure all the more easier."

"Oh, right..." Ryuji recalled. "We just gotta take that thing and Kamoshida'll be singing like a jail bird, right?"

Ann tilted her head. "That thing?" she asked, confused. "What are you guys talking about?"

"I suppose you'll find out soon enough." Makoto said. "But, Takamaki-san. Are you sure about this? What we're about to do... I won't lie. It's going to be dangerous. We've almost died a few times because of it. And what you might see, it isn't something anyone should see." Ann's fierce look didn't fade in the least. Makoto wanted to try and convince her further, but even she could only fold her hands in defeat. She shook her head and smiled thinly before turning to Akira. "Well, Akira-kun."

He nodded and took out his phone. Bringing up the app and tapping a few buttons, the world began to twist and warp around them. Soon enough, the Metaverse engulfed reality and them along with it.

TakeYourTime

Ann's reaction - both to Shujin Academy turning into a castle and Morgana in his bipedal form - had been utterly priceless. It had taken a while for her to calm down before they could properly explain the situation to her: starting with how they first discovered this world and meeting Morgana to them obtaining their powers, along with how to bring Kamoshida's crimes to light.

"So, if I get this right..." Ann said slowly, sitting on a crate as she went over the information. "The root of Kamoshida's twisted desires is this thing called the Treasure. And if we steal it, he'll reform? Do I have that right?"

"That is correct, ojou-sama." Morgana nodded. "By stealing his corrupt desires, Kamoshida will undergo a change of heart. And without his corrupt desires to help him justify or hold account of his actions, the guilt will eat away to the point where he will publicly confess his crimes." His eyes then hardened. "However, there's also a chance he'll undergo a mental shutdown, since desires are what keep you functioning properly."

"I see..." Ann said. She was quiet for a moment before she looked at the three. "And, you guys are serious about this?"

Ryuji snorted. "Been waitin' for a chance to get back at Kamoshida since what happened with the Track Team." he said. His eyes turned sad before a moment before his fury returned. "Just wish it

were under better circumstances."

"Agreed." Makoto chimed, folding her arms. "We had tried to find other ways of exposing Kamoshida, but Kobayakawa values him too much. Even if we do expose his crimes, the Principal will only suspend him from teaching. Sooner or later, he'll come back. As much as I don't like it...this really is our only option." Sighing heavily, she turned to Akira and Morgana. "So, do you two have an idea where the Treasure might be?"

Akira nodded. "Sort of." he said before raising his hand, pointing to the very back of the castle. "It should be somewhere in the back. Maybe in one of the towers."

"Very astute Joker." Morganna chirped. "Yes. A King would keep his treasury in one of the surrounding towers."

"Really?" Ryuji questioned. "Would have thought that it would be like one of those RPGs and the Treasure would be in the Throne Room or something."

Akira smiled thinly. "Funny you should say that..."

"...oh, you gotta be kidding me!"

"Yep." Morgana grinned cheekily. "Kamoshida's Throne Room is in one of those Towers. Of course, before we can think about investigating them, we need a map of the entire castle. We can't go in blind."

Makoto nodded. "Then that should be our first priority." she said. She then turned to Ann, eyes softening in concern. "Will you be okay, Takamaki-san? Once we go inside, there's no going back."

"I'll be fine." She nodded resolutely. "There's no way I'm going to let a pervert who thinks he's king of the school stop me from avenging Shiho."

"Alright then." Akira bobbed his head while pulling his glove. "The mission begins."

"Wait!" Morgana stopped them before they could advance, causing

Akira to stumble and Ryuji to bump into him.

"What now, fur-bucket?" Ryuji snapped.

"We can't go in there just yet. If we're going to be pulling off this heist, then we will need code names!"

"Huh? Why?"

"Why?" Morgana harumphed, putting his paws to his hips. "You do realize that we're walking into Kamoshida's territory, right? If you use your real names, chances are, the Kamoshida in the real world is going to start becoming more antagonistic towards you all. That's why it would be better if you use code names!"

Makoto frowned. "But he already knows who we are, though." she pointed out. "He's already seen our faces."

"True, but therein lies the beauty of your Persona." Morgana said, causing everyone to look at him, confused. "Those masks, along with your costumes, aren't just fashion statements. They're a symbol of rebellion. It also interferes with the Palace ruler's own perception. Even if he knows who you are, your Personas will interfere with his cognition."

Ryuji stared at him flatly. "...in English, cat?"

"It means, so long as we have our Personas, even Kamoshida does know who we are, he can't recognize us." Makoto explained, surprising everyone. "Do I have that right, Morgana?"

"That's correct! I'm glad to see there's someone's following along."

Ryuji growled, glaring at Morgana. "Why you-!"

"Anyway..." Akira interrupted before they could argue. "So what will our code names be?"

"For you, it will be Joker." Morgana stated, looking at him. "Our ace-in-the-hole."

Akira nodded, accepting the nickname. He even began to smile

somewhat, noting how fitting it felt. "Okay, so what's mine?" Ryuji asked. "Better not be something stupid, like 'Vandal' or 'Outlaw'."

Ann smirked. "Oh, so does that mean we can't call you 'Thug'?"

"Hell no!"

Morgana sighed, shaking his head. "Then what do you want to be called?"

"Well, if I'm gonna be called anything, then it's gotta be this mask, right?" He gestured to the skeletal mask on his face.

"So...how about Skull?"

"Skull...I like it! Short, sweet, and badass!" Ryuji exclaimed.

"Then what should mine be?" Makoto questioned.

"I got the perfect one!" The blonde male clapped his hands. "Ms. Post-Apocalyptic Raider!"

The student council president frowned, not finding the name the least bit amusing. "...do you want to get smacked?"

The glare she leveled at him was enough to send shivers down his back. For a moment, the poor boy thought he saw the Shinigami behind her, scythe ready to claim his lost soul. Everyone else, however, wondered if Ryuji even had a filter for that mouth of his. Or if he even thought before he spoke his mind.

"Maybe Prez?" Ann offered. "Since you're the Student Council President?"

"Sounds too generic." came the swift surprising response. "Next."

"Spikes?" Morgana offered, looking at the aforementioned decorations on her outfit.

At this reminder of how her costume made her look, Makoto slightly deflated, though she maintained her powerful image. "Next."

"Queen." Makoto blinked and looked at Akira, who was looking at her rather thoughtfully. "Would that work, Niijima-senpai?"

"Queen...yeah. I like it. From now on, I am Queen."

"She does feel like an Empress..." Morgana quipped.

Ryuji bobbed his head in agreement. Makoto gave them a look, and immediately they froze up. "You want to say something?"

"N-nothing, ma'am!" the two replied in sync.

Ann giggled. "She has them whipped."

Akira nodded, smiling in amusement before turning back to the castle. A pulse washed over him, Arsene's presence enveloping him. For a moment, his mask burned azure before it settled. He grinned, sharing his other self's thoughts.

Kamoshida was going to pay.

TakeYourTime

Infiltration had been easy. There were few knights roaming around, but they were rather easy to deal with. Ann had been surprised to see them, especially what happened after they were brutally destroyed and reduced to black-and-red muck. She already figured that they were Shadows, but was still overwhelmed all the same. However, that shock faded when she saw the obvious signs that the castle belonged to Kamoshida, from the statues of voluptuous women to a few books that she found and read out of curiosity as they sat in a room.

It only disgusted her more and more.

"Man, what is with this room?" Ryuji questioned, noting how the room seemed to shimmer back and form between being a room to a classroom at school. "Is Kamoshida having trouble deciding if he wants this place to even be here or somethin'?"

"Kamoshida's control isn't absolute." Morgana informed him, standing atop the table. "There's obviously going to be small holes

that rats can scurry around in. The cognition here is incredibly weak, so the Shadows don't wander in. It makes the perfect place to plan out our assault." The not-cat creature then opened one of his pouches, taking out a folded parchment. As he undid the folds, it revealed itself to be a map. Ryuji sat in one of the chairs, looking it over while Akira and Makoto stood around the table. "Joker and I have covered nearly all of this area...all except for here."

He tapped his paw against one of the areas encircled in red. Ann leaned in, noticing that the area was unfinished, meaning that it was what they had on the map so far.

"Going by the lack of guards, Kamoshida's probably amped up security around this area." he brought up. "In which case, it will be a pain to try and get through."

"So we can't force our way through?" Ryuji frowned. "Then can't we go around 'em?"

"Can't." Akira shook his head. "We didn't find any other route."

Makoto hummed, cupping her chin. "Going by what you guys mapped, our only real option would be to try and avoid them while breaking through the line." she said, scanning the map. "It isn't unfeasible to try and eliminate all the guards, but we'll probably be exhausted from fighting them all. And that isn't for accounting for any reinforcements. And we can't go around, since there isn't any other way. In that case..." She traced her finger around the ballroom, eventually touching one of the maps leading to the lower levels of the castle. "Why not going underground? I noticed that there were a few aqueducts in the dungeon. What if we tried to use them?"

Ryuji stiffened. "Er...you sure that's a good idea, Mako-er, Queen?" he asked, catching his slip up. "I mean, ain't underground where...?"

Ann tilted her head, looking back and forth. She noticed how tense everyone seemed to be at the mention of 'dungeon.' "What's wrong? If that's our only option, we should take it."

"W-well, yeah, but..."

Akira looked at Morgana. "Well, Mona?"

The bipedal feline folded his arms in thought. "...it's a feasible option. We are familiar with the area from your first encounter there and it's possible Kamoshida diverted most of the Shadows patrolling there. That being said, I'm not sure if it's the best place to show Lady Ann."

"What place? Just where are you guys talking about?" She questioned.

The three Persona users glanced at one another, trying to find a way to explain the circumstances to her. In the end, Akira decided to state it bluntly.

"...the underground is where the dungeons are. It's where Kamoshida has cognitions of the students he tortures."

Ann froze. "T-torture...?" she whispered. Images of such vile acts began to play out in her head. A thought then crossed her mind, which caused her heart to freeze. "W-was...was Shiho's...?"

Akira answered her question with silence.

"Oh my god..." Ann gasped. But after a moment, she shook her head. "No. If the dungeons really are the only way, then let's go. I'll be fine."

"You sure?"

The blonde nodded. It was obvious she was not okay, but she was willing to brave it. Akira's face softened, concerned for her wellbeing before taking a breath. He was starting to rethink bringing her with them. But the past is the past.

This would be better than let her act recklessly, anyway. He couldn't imagine what would happen if she were try and confront Kamoshida right now.

TakeYourTime

"Surprise, asswipe!"

That was all the guard heard before Ryuji rammed his foot into its mask, shattering it and destroying the head in the process. It was surprising to see how easily the metal crumpled beneath Ryuji's boot, but given the fragile nature of their weakpoint and that they now had supernatural abilities, Akira wasn't going to dwell on the subject.

Makoto, however, had a few words with the blonde.

"Are you trying to tell Kamoshida we're here?!" she hissed, glaring at Ryuji in disapproval. "I think every guard in the castle heard you! Can't you be a voyeur in silence?!"

Ryuji flinched, recoiling from the intensity of her shout. "S-sorry!"

"Whatever." Makoto dismissed him, shaking her head before giving the blonde male one last glare, promising to talk with him more on the subject before looking around. "Okay. Assuming the guards didn't hear Skull shouting like a moron, we should be able to take them out quietly. Still, how strange. I recall a number of them transforming when we entered the Palace before. These ones don't seem able to."

"Wait, transform?" Ann asked. "You mean they turn into monsters?"

"Shadows aren't just monsters." Morgana explained to them. "They're the deepest, darkest emotions humans bury in their hearts. They're a side of you you pretend doesn't exist, or wouldn't dare show to others. You might even say they're corrupted Personas."

Ryuji gawked. "For real?!" he questioned. "So, let me get this straight. We've been fighting other people's Personas?!"

"Yes...and no." the creature waved a hand. "I'll explain later. Let's find the aqueduct." He took out the map again, his blue eyes scanning the parchment. "Let's see...it should be on the second level, right near the entrance."

"Is it away from the Training Hall?" Akira asked, giving Ann a brief glance. Thankfully, Morgana shook his head. "Okay. Let's go."

He was grateful for that little fact. The less Ann had to see, the

better. No use traumatizing her with more of Kamoshida's deplorable acts. The group then continued to move. Along the way, Ann saw the people trapped in the cages. She couldn't see their faces very well, but each of them was battered and wrapped in gauze. She also noticed the clothes that they wore.

Volleyball team uniforms.

'The team Shiho was on...'

She shook her head again. She couldn't stop now. She had to keep moving onward. Even so, every time she looked at each of them, she envisioned Shiho in their place. Beaten. Broken. Pitiful.

Her hands balled into trembling fists and her teeth gnashed together in anger. In the depths of her heart, she wanted nothing more than see Kamoshida in Shiho's position. She LONGED for that day to come. If stealing his Treasure would break him in such a humiliating way, she would take that option.

'Don't worry, Shiho.' she solemnly promised her friend, praying she would be alright. *'I will make that sick freak pay for what he's done!'*

"Hey guys, I think I see it!" Skull proclaimed as they neared their destination.

Ann snapped out of it and returned to reality. She was in the middle of a corridor, and behind her was a staircase. ' *How long have I been out of it?'* she wondered idly. Ryuji stood over a small opening in the ground, barely big enough to fit the average adult inside. Naturally, it was filled with water.

"Looks like a tight fit." Ann said, joining the others. She then looked at Morgana. "Will you be okay, Mona?"

"Eh? Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, since you're a cat and all, I thought..."

"I'm not a cat!" Morgana snapped back instinctively.

"But...you look like a cat though..."

Akira shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Oh boy...here we go again."

TakeYourTime

Meanwhile, in the castle, Shadow Kamoshida sat in his throne rather leisurely, slouching upon his seat with one leg propped on the armrest, and the other supporting his chin. Before him was a golden knight: one of his most trusted lieutenants. A noticeable feature about it, compared to the previous ones, was that it was slightly larger than the others with a menacing red aura around it.

"Have you captured the thieves yet?" the King questioned. In spite of his casual posture, there was a stern and overall dangerous look in his golden eyes. **"More importantly, have you killed them?"**

"Nay, Sire." the knight responded with regret. ***"They have not shown themselves since their previous attempts yesterday. Lord Berith was slain, though he was able to significantly wound them. However, one of our captains has begun to increase security here in the Tower and has taken one of the Eyes of Wonder with him as a precaution. I was chosen to guard the second Eye. Should the knaves attempt to infiltrate the Castle again, they will need to defeat us both to enter the Throne Room."***

"See to it that you do. Otherwise I will be extremely disappointed."

"Of course, sire." The knight bowed, well aware of what that meant. ***"We have also increased security in the upper levels. Should the knaves continue this foolish endeavor of theirs, they will not find their quest so easy. We have tasked two of our men with protecting the Sanctuary. A group of Incubus and Succubus protect the Gardens. The captain intends to guard the Library, given that the key to the Tower lies there."***

Shadow Kamoshida chuckled. **"I see...not bad!"** he praised, lifting a hand. " **I'll make sure you're greatly rewarded."**

"Many thanks, Your Majesty!"

"SIRE! SIRE!"

Suddenly, the doors threw open as a plain gray knight rushed in. Shadow Kamoshida raised an eyebrow, watching the knight fumble in its approach before hastily kneeling before him. ***"S-Sire, I bring dire news! The thieves have been reported to have returned!"***

"So they came back, huh?" the King huffed. **"They must be gluttons for punishment."**

"T-that isn't all! The Princess is with them!"

For a moment, Shadow Kamoshida looked stunned. His golden eyes widened greatly, shifting in his seat before a cold smile touched his face. Slowly, that smile grew sickening, morphing into a toothy grin.

TakeYourTime

"You okay, Ann?" Makoto asked as she pulled the blonde girl out of the aqueduct. "We should probably find something to dry you off. Last thing we need is for you getting sick."

"N-no, I'm fine." Ann assured her, though her body betrayed her words as a slight shiver ran down her back. "S-seriously, I'm fine."

"Well, too late, already got something." Ryuji replied as he brought a blanket over.

"Where did you get that?"

"Found it in one of the crates." he said, gesturing to one of the many boxes in the room. Thankfully, the aqueduct apparently connected to another room that was not under Kamoshida's control, if the shimmering was of any indication. "Here ya go."

"Thanks..." Seeing no point in refusing his offer, the model gratefully accepted the blanket, wrapping it around her body. Hugging it closely to her body, she looked over to see Akira and Morgana over by the door. "Is something wrong?"

"Guards." Morgana replied. "Lots of 'em. From the looks of it, this is where most of the security is." The not-cat frowned heavily, glancing away in thought and muttering aloud. "But why? What's so special about the upper area?"

"Should we wait for it to thin?" Akira questioned.

"We don't really have any other choice. But who knows how long they will stay before dispersing?"

"Can we maybe take them out one by one?" Makoto asked as she approached, peeking through the door with Akira. She counted at least four different knights, marching together as a unit passing through the hallway. "Morgana, when you mentioned the Shadows, you said they were like Corrupted Personas? Does that have to do why some of them change forms?"

"Sort of. They aren't exactly Personas in the sense you're thinking of. They're more like a pile of negative emotions that are kept buried deep beneath. In the Metaverse, the stronger the negative emotions, the more powerful the Shadow. Hence why some rid themselves of what the Palace Rulers bind them too."

"What they're bound to? What do you mean by that?" Makoto inquired.

Akira was the first to reach the answer. "The armor."

"You caught on quick, Joker." Morgana smirked while the others looked at them in confusion. "The Shadows are bound to those armors by Kamoshida. The stronger ones can temporarily return to their true form, but they're otherwise obedient to Kamoshida. The weaker Shadows, however, can't remove the armors."

"So that explains why some of the Shadows we fought threw away their armor on their own, while we had to forcibly remove it ourselves via their masks." Makoto realized.

"Exactly. Of course, the weaker Shadows will be destroyed once they lose the only thing that keeps them corporeal: their armor. The stronger ones, meanwhile, can exist in their true forms and release

their full power."

"So, basically..." Ryuji scratched his head. "The scrubs are easy to take down because they can't go full power, but the others that can get rid of the armor are stronger?"

"Correct."

Ann frowned. "Shadows...Personas...cognition..." she muttered, shaking her head. "This all so much to take in at once...a-and you guys only found this out a few days ago?"

"Yeah." Makoto nodded, a sheepish grin on her face. "Very strange, isn't it?"

"That's putting it mildly, Niijima-senpai."

"Well, its really all due to Morgana that we were able to get this far."

Morgana puffed his chest proudly, folding his arms. Akira rolled his eyes. It was painfully obvious how prideful he was and how he soaked up the praise. He returned his attention to the door and leaned in. His eyes narrowed when he noticed something as another patrol passed by.

A golden knight.

'Another one of those guys.' he thought. *'That means it's someone powerful.'*

"Hurry up and find them!" the golden knight growled. ***"We must find the Princess at all costs!"***

He blinked. "...princess?"

Before he could find out any more, the knights dispersed in different directions. He turned to face his friends.

"What was that about a Princess?"

"Who the hell knows?" Ryuji shook his head, shrugging his shoulders. "Then again, since we're inside Kamoshida's head,

maybe it's someone he's gunning for?"

"Someone he's gunning for..." Akira said in thought. Then his eyes widened in realization as he snapped over to Ann.

The others reached the same conclusion, looking at her in both fright and horror.

It should have obvious. Why hadn't they seen it before? Kamoshida's advances... He had made it pretty obvious that he was interested in Ann. Akira remembered the times he found them together. The first when he arrived at Shujin Academy, and the second when he had attempted to coerce Ann into coming with him sometime afterwards.

Ann realized why everyone was staring at her. Her stomach dropped and her body began to quiver uncontrollably. "N-no..."

"That sick bastard!" Ryuji slammed his fist on the table. "He'll never stop to get what he wants!"

"Skull." Makoto hissed. "Calm down. Getting angry isn't going to do any good!"

"But-!"

She held up a hand, stopping him. Her face was set in stone, but one could obviously see that she was equally, if not moreso disgusted by Kamoshida than before. "I know...don't worry." She turned back to Morgana, who kept his eyes on the door. "Mona. How are things looking outside?"

"This whole Princess business has gotten them riled. They're all over the place." he replied as he turned to face her with a grin on his face. "Thankfully, they aren't as many guards as before."

"Good. Think we can take them out before anyone notices?"

"I'd say so."

Makoto's eyes hardened as she approached, hands balled into tight fists. "Then let's go." Everyone nodded and crowded the door. Akira

peered out from the small crack, counting the number of guards. Five, six. Maybe seven guards in total. Unless a few of them could transform, they should be able to get rid of them easily. "On three. One."

He held a hand over his mask as Arsene's laughter rung in his head. The avian mask became wreathed in azure flames. Ryuji cracked his knuckles and shoulders, looking forward to releasing some stress. Morgana brandished what looked to be a cartoonish scimitar, but still possessing a deadly sharp edge of the traces of black muck were of any indication.

"Two."

Makoto's own mask burned azure. Ann stayed behind the group, nervous but otherwise determined. She couldn't falter now. Not when she made up her mind.

They were going to make Kamoshida pay!

"Three!"

The masks vanished as they burst through the door. The Shadows, stunned, brandished their swords. Their resistance was futile as the sound of an engine at full throttle, along with the demonic visage of Arsene, overwhelmed them with Ryuji and Morgana drawing first blood, bashing the head of one guard and slicing the other in half.

Then the hallway exploded into conflict.

TakeYourTime

"Milord!" a knight reported, rushing up the King. ***"The thieves have breached the upper levels of the castle!"***

"What?!" the golden knight snarled. ***"How is that possible? We sealed off the only way into the upper levels! And the guard stationed there reported no signs of them!"***

Shadow Kamoshida chuckled in amusement. **"It seems they're a resourceful bunch."** he remarked as he craned his head to the knights. **"And my 'princess' is with them?"**

"Yes. It seems she is with them, Lord Kamoshida!"

If possible, the smile on the horrid man's face grew to unearthly proportions. **"Good. I suppose it's time to go greet them."** he said before turning to the scantily-clad woman next to him, who purred as he rubbed her chin. **"Don't you think so too, my dear?"**

"Of course, Kamoshida-sama." the girl breathed, eyes glassy and voice monotone with hardly any emotion. *"Will you execute them?"*

"A foolish question. Anyone who obeys me will die." His golden eyes burned with malice as the smile turned into a sickening leer. **"And I'll make sure these fools die a most painful one!"**

TakeYourTime

"Hurry it up!" Morgana shouted as he ran ahead of them. "If we dillydally, the Shadows will find us!"

"Shut it, cat!" Ryuji snapped angrily as they rounded the corner. "Dammit! We really must have pissed Kamoshida off back there! These guys won't quit!"

"What did you expect would happen?!" the not-cat creature shot back. "Of course he'd be pissed when you all but challenged his authority!"

"Well, we're pissed at him too. Next time I see him, I'm punching in him the face!"

Akira remained silent.

He was more focused on the objective while staying close to Ann. A few Shadows had managed to get close, creating a few small wear and tears along her uniform. There were also a few minor bruises, but those were easily fixed by Orpheus and a few strums of his lyre. Morgana had been correct in his prowess, it seemed. Arsene could rip apart Shadows with its bare hands and its darkness, whereas Orpheus' specialty lay with healing and defensive abilities. Of course, that didn't mean the mechanical Persona couldn't deliver a good beat down with the oversized instrument.

'It really is too dangerous for Ann to be here.' the phantom thief thought worriedly. *'Kamoshida is after her in reality, and after what happened to Suzui-san's cognition...'*

He shut his eyes, not wanting to think what the Shadow of the man would do to her if she was ever caught.

' *Still...what is this feeling of apprehension I'm getting?'*

The group eventually turned around another corner. A guard was in their way, sword already brandished. ***"Halt! In the name of-!"***

"Eff off!" Ryuji interrupted as he charged at the Shadow. He ducked beneath a swing before headbutting the knight in the face, knocking it to the ground. Before it could get up, he slammed his foot down and crushed the head with ease, reducing it to a shapeless puddle of ooze. "And stay down!"

'We need to find a place to rest, soon.' Akira grimaced. ' *Ryuji's leg is starting to act up.'*

As much as the blonde male tried to hide it, Akira noticed his friend's leg shake every now and then. He was forcing himself to continue and not say anything to prevent the others from worrying.

If need be, he would have them retreat. There was no need to risk two people. Especially when one was crippled.

As they ran, they eventually came to a stop inside a large room. It looked very similar to the grand hall from before, though it appeared to be slightly more grand in comparison to the one before it. It looked more like some kind of dance hall, given the elaborate decorations and red fabric that ran across the walls and the ampitheatre above them. Supporting it were pillars, though much to their disgust, the pillars were not mere columns but busts of the female torso, with emphasized rears and chest proportions. They had no arms, only having legs up to the thighs and wearing a gym attire consisting of a white shirt and red bloomer pants.

And before them were an array of guards.

"Ah, shit..." Ryuji cursed. He put a hand over his mask, ready to call

on his Persona. "Out of the way, assholes! We're going through!"

"Tsk, tsk...you never learn, do you, Track Traitor?"

Everyone stood still as the knights parted, revealing a familiar face. One that repulsed them to no end. The greatest reaction to him, however, was from Ann, who's features lit up with unrestrained rage, eyes burning with fury and stepping ahead of Makoto and Ryuji who stood in front of her in order to protect her in case the Shadows got too close.

"Kamoshida...!"

"You pitiful fools never learn, do you?" Shadow Kamoshida shook his head, a disgusting smirk on his face all the while. **"Do you want to die that badly?"**

Ryuji scoffed. "You weren't so high and mighty when you got your ass handed to you when me and Queen beat the shit out of your guards."

"Don't push your luck, brat." the King warned him. **"Your execution is going to be painful enough as is."** He paused, then his grin grew. " **Though it would bring me satisfaction to see you squirm a bit more before you die."**

"You can act tough all you want. You were the one acting like a sniveling coward when we whooped your ass." Skull did not back down. When dealing with this asshole, he was never going to back off again. "Isn't a King supposed to lead his subjects? All you do is run away when the going gets tough. If you ask me, you're no king. You're just a shit-tier villain!"

Shadow Kamoshida snarled. **"You really want me to break your other leg, don't you, you defiant piece of garbage?!"**

"Y-you...!" All eyes turned to Ann, who's body continued to shake while staring at Kamoshida in anger. For a while, Akira was worried she might rush in and strike at him. "How dare you...act all smug...after what you did to Shiho, you bastard?!"

"Hm? Ah, Ann-chan! So you've come to greet me personally!"

The King sneered. **"How wonderful~"**

"Shut it, you son of a bitch!" the girl responded harshly. Akira slowly inched closer to her, ready to pull her away in case she did something rash. "I won't let you get away with what you did to Shiho!"

"Shiho?" Shadow Kamoshida cocked his head quizically, as if unfamiliar. He rubbed his chin, looking up at the ceiling in thought. **"Hm, where have I heard that name before...?"**

"Y-you..." For a moment, Ann was utterly shocked. They couldn't blame her. The man was all but admitting that Shiho was just another face to him. Someone for him to abuse. "Y-you don't remember her?! She was the girl who you beat and raped the other day! The one who tried to kill herself because of you!"

The King snapped his fingers. **"Oooh, her. Yes, the little dunce. I admit, she was my favorite for a while...but really, you honestly expect me to remember the face of every concubine?"**

Makoto grounded her teeth, tempted to punch him in the face. "So that's all women are to you? Objects?!"

"Hmhmhm...I'll leave that to your imagination, little miss Student Council President." Shadow Kamoshida responded before turning his attention back to Ann. **"Still, how violent. I would have expected a lot more from you, Ann-chan."** He then craned his head, looking at someone who was approaching from behind. **"Don't you think so too, my *princess* ?"**

A soft giggle could be heard from behind the man, eventually stepping into view. Akira's eyes widened, and soon he found Arsene throbbing in fury. Ryuji's scowl grew ever more fierce and Makoto's fingers curled into tight fists. Ann, however, was stunned by what she saw, taking a step back. Appearing next to Shadow Kamoshida was a woman in her teens, wearing a rather skimpy attire that looked more like lingerie than anything else and left virtually nothing to the imagination. Her skin was flawless and her form was slender, possessing a rather impressive bust and large hips that sauntered and swayed with great attention before latching her thin arms

around the King's burly shoulder. Atop her blonde hair were a pair of fake cat ears.

The most startling feature, however, was her face.

"N-no way..." Ann gaped. "That's...me?!"

TO BE CONTINUED...

A/N: I am not sorry for the late update, nor the lack of fighting. I got sick, gaming, and college shit.

Special thanks to Daemon of Wrath for helping me with this chapter. You are the best, man.

Also, you're not dreaming. There is another chapter up. And that chapter was done DAYS ago. Me and Daemon JUST got done with this thing.

As always, please review.

Confidant I: Le Pape – Part I

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Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

Confidant I: Le Pape – Part I

"...your work as a Phantom Thief must have been quite taxing, especially when you were doubling as a high school student, Akira-kun."

The frizzy-haired teen slightly tilted his head at Sae's words, especially as she took a moment to compose herself. No doubt she was still trying to discern whether to take his words at face value. He

was, after all, spouting supernatural mumbo-jumbo. It would be natural for her to try and dismiss his claims, though the change in subject was rather bizarre. Perhaps she thought he was still tired and under the effects of the drug?

After a moment, he realized that wasn't the case. No, her face told him she had been accepting his story. At least, so far. Her change in topic was voluntary.

"I imagine plotting such detailed heists can be rather tiresome. Additionally, even if you had help, you still would have required external sources. Others who perhaps sympathized with you, or shared a similar interest or common goal." Sae opened her red eyes and crossed her legs and arms, staring at him with sheer intensity. For a moment, he felt as if he would cower under it, if he had not been so accustomed to it. "We have evidence that you have had such help."

Ah. So that was where she was going with this.

"Intricate model guns, far too advanced and realistic to be cheap dime-store models. Medicines and drugs that can't be found in any pharmacy. Not to mention other factors, such as someone helping you at school or the fact that each Calling Card had a profound message of some sort, capable of striking support from many on top of putting your targets in such disarray. Such messages are clear signs of charisma and psychological warfare, things common for anyone trying or participating in politics. And that's not even accounting for the possible aid you receive from individuals in the media and at school. Someone had to be covering your bases."

Her fingernail drummed against the table while they had a staring match, both parties daring the other to blink. It was tense and nerve-wracking, but Akira had been through worse.

"It's logical for you to have confidants, outside of your normal life." Sae said, voice sharp like a knife. "You have such partners, yes?"

Akira gave a wry smile. "Don't we all have a confidant, in some way?"

"...let me rephrase the question. Do you remember Sojiro Sakura?"

"Of course I do. You were the one who recommended him to me, Sae-san.

"...damn."

Akira could only say this much as he stared at object in his hand.

Morgana poked his head out from the bag, looking at the wallet with a hint of curiosity. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Something wrong, Joker?"

"I thought it would be a good idea if we could get some equipment for our heists in the Palace." the Phantom Thief answered lamely. "Using our Personas too much leads us to get exhausted. It would be better if we had some weapons. Makoto and Ryuji already have the model guns, but it wouldn't hurt to have some extra protection. Maybe some medical equipment handy, too."

"Ah, I see." Morgana bobbed his head, a twinkle in his eye. "I'm glad to see your taking your new profession quite seriously. So, what's the problem?"

Akira stared at his item a while longer before he closed it and sighed, lowering his head.

TakeYourTime

"You're broke?"

Sae looked up from her laptop, taking this brief chance to speak with Akira who had recently returned home late after spending time at a nearby restaurant. Particularly, Big Bang Burger. She raised an eyebrow, suspicious of his motives as she turned to face him fully. "And you're telling me this, because...?"

"I'm trying to find a part-time job." Akira told her, much to her surprise. It was not uncommon for high schoolers to want to apply for part-time jobs, but it was still quite impressive to hear. It seemed

like he was taking his probation and schooling seriously enough, though the financial stuff was a bit worrying. Was he falling in with the bad crowd? "I'd like your consent first, since you're my legal guardian."

Ah. That makes sense. Sae thought, nodding her head. His move was logical. Of course, that said...

"You do realize how hard that would be, right Kurusu-kun?" she asked him critically. "Don't forget. You are on probation. It would be quite easy for someone to learn you have a criminal record, and that makes your chances much harder."

Akira sighed, scratching his head. "I'm aware..."

"Are you?" Sae asked harshly. Akira's sheepish look was her answer. She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

As she thought about it, him getting a part-time job, while possibly detrimental to his studies, did have the upside of her not having to worry about his financial situation. Makoto had never needed to worry about monetary things, especially since she was focused on getting into a good university and her studies. In a way, this would be good for not just her, but for Akira. At the very least, she wouldn't have to worry about him asking for something as idiotic as an allowance.

Then came the glaringly obvious problem.

His damnable *record* .

It would not be hard for anyone to look it up once he gave them his resume. It definitely limited his options. Off the top of her head, Sae could only recall three possible part-time jobs from the ads she found on the news site she often frequented whenever she wasn't working on a case. A Beef Bowl Shop, a Convenience Store and a Flower Shop, all of which were located in Shibuya. It wasn't far from Shujin, and it wouldn't be a problem for him to return home either. But the problem always returned to his record.

Another factor were the students at his school. They were aware of

his records, thanks to the teachers being woefully inadequate at their job and keeping his criminal past under lock and key. Odds were high that at least one of those jobs would involve a student at Shujin either also an employee at one of those work places or frequented one of the stores. Even if the owners were to allow Akira to work there, the environment would probably be less than ideal for him.

So what job would suit him best? It would have to be someplace where students wouldn't usually frequent. It would also have to be a place where he could easily reach in at least under half an hour and return home just before the set curfew.

Eventually, one idea came to her and a small smile touched her lips, one that earned a look of curiosity from her young prisoner.

"I think I have an idea..."

TakeYourTime

"What a nice change of pace." Morgana remarked, purring in delight. "A little bit rustic, but it isn't congested like everywhere else in the city."

Akira nodded in agreement, looking around Yongen-Jaya alley with a bit of amazement and wonder. The streets were narrow, just barely big enough for a car to get through, and the alley by itself wasn't very big. If anything, it was packed by the many small stores and apartments that lined it. Compared to the congested and overflowing streets of Shibuya crossing, which had many people coming and going all at once, the teen only found a small handful of people coming and going. Most of which were elderly persons.

"It's nice and quiet here." Akira hummed thoughtfully. "Hardly anyone."

After soaking in the scenery, the phantom thief took his time to get a better layout of the alley. There was a small convenience store, which had small little knickknacks such as pharmacy goods and snacks, a doctor's office, a batting cage, bathhouse, laundry mat and a thrift store, which had little odds and ends.

Using what little money he had, Akira bought a few items he thought would be useful for crafting tools the next time he and his friends would investigate the Palace.

Afterwards, he searched and immediately found his target after a minute. Currently, the frizzy-haired teen stood outside the door of a small cafe, which had a vibrant pink-and-white striped arch above the door with a wooden plaque above. To his slight amusement, it read: "Le Blanc."

"This looks like the place." Morgana said. He took a look at the sign and then furrowed his brows. "Wait a second...coffee and *curry* ? What?! H-how does that work? Is...is that really a thing?"

The not-cat creature turned to look at him for answers. He gave a shrug before he grabbed hold of the handle and pushed it open, stepping inside. If the outside was rustic, the inside was like being in an antique. To the left were booths lined with tables and seats. A woman with blue hair and a leather jacket was found drinking a cup of coffee while a large television set was found at the counter, where a middle-aged man could be found behind a counter, reading a newspaper in hand with pen.

"Hm..." the old man hummed, twirling the pen in his hand. "A shellfish that hooks pearls into its mouth."

"Still stuck on that thing, Boss?" the woman asked as she drank from her cup. The man gave her a wry stare before shaking his head and turned back to his paper. She then looked at the TV, which was doing a news report and shook her head. "Another accident this week. I swear, if a car comes tumbling through Yongen, I'll start thinking about moving from Tokyo."

"...excuse me?" Akira called, keeping his voice as quiet and respectable as possible. This earned him the attention of both adults as they turned to look at him. "I'm looking for Sakura-san?"

The old man raised a brow, setting his paper down and removing himself from his stool. "Right here." he said gruffly as he walked over to Akira. "Did you need something, kid?"

Akira looked at the man. His face was aged with a sharp, curled beard at his chin and a pair of sharp eyes behind a pair of glasses. A pink button shirt lay underneath the dark apron he wore, along with white khaki slacks and black leather shoes.

He was undoubtedly Sojiro Sakura.

" *Ohayo* ." Akira greeted respectfully as he bowed his head, surprising the barista. "My name is Akira Kurusu. Sae-san said you could help me with a part-time job?"

Sojiro blinked. "Kurusu?" he inquired, feeling as if he had heard the name before until he recognized the second name. "Oh! You're the kid Niijima-san mentioned. She did say you were swinging by."

"Oh? Help at this old place?" the woman at the booth said, smiling as she looked at the two. "Well, I'll be." She then rose up to her feet, grabbing her purse and setting down a few couple hundred yen. "Thanks for the coffee, Boss. I'll swing buy again tomorrow."

"Alright." Sojiro nodded, nodding his head as she left. Akira stepped aside, bowing his head respectfully to her as she left. She giggled at his well-mannered behavior before she left the store, leaving the two alone. Sojiro then turned back to Akira and folded his arms. "When Niijima-san gave me that phone call the other day, I wasn't sure what to expect. To be honest, I stopped looking for help years ago."

He shrugged. "Oh well. Better late than never. So, kid. How do you know Niijima-san, anyway? Friends with her kid sister?"

"Sort of. She's my guardian for the year."

"Guardian?" the barista asked curiously.

"Her father and mine had a history together. I had some...problems back home, and it kind of got me booted here."

For a minute, Sojiro was silent. His eyes were narrowed sharply, as of looking for something. Eventually, recognition flashed. "Ah, so you're the one..." he murmured to himself, much to Akira's confusion. "Wait here a second." Sojiro then moved behind the counter, shuffling about as he grabbed a few items from his

workspace. Once he did, he beckoned Akira over. "You know how to make coffee?"

"Just the basics." he answered honestly. "I've never tried instant coffee, though."

Sojiro snorted. "Well, at least you have some taste." Akira stepped behind the counter, noticing the items. It was a small handful of beans and a mug, along with a coffee maker and white paper fold. "Let me see what you know. If you's adequate, you're hired. If not, well..."

Akira nodded and set his bag down, leaving Morgana to look on with great interest as he removed his jacket, rolling up his sleeves.

TakeYourTime

After a minute or so of brewing, Akira had finished his cup of coffee. Throughout the whole ordeal, Sojiro had been watching him like a hawk, practically looking for something – anything – that he could criticize. The boy did not pretend to be a know-it-all when it came to making coffee. He considered himself to be a novice. He had only made coffee a few times, and that was mostly just for his father when he was heading for work. Once he was finished, he stepped aside to let Sojiro inspect his work.

The old man walked over, taking the cup. He gave it a quick whiff and a small motion of the wrist, watching as the liquid swirled in the container before he took a sip. Akira watched, nervously, as the old man's throat bulged for a moment, gulping down the hot liquid before he removed the cup from his lips, furrowing his brow.

"...the flavor is off." he said bluntly with a look of distaste, causing Akira to flinch. "The texture is lacking. In all honesty, it's quite bland."

The teen sighed. *Well, so much for that...*

"But I can't say it's the worst coffee I've had." Akira looked back up to see Sojiro with a hint of a smile on his aging mug. "You're an amateur, but there is room to grow." With surprising gusto, Sojiro downed the rest of the coffee in mere seconds before he set it back

down on the counter with a content and satisfied sigh. "Alright. I'll hire you. I can't pay you much, just around 1,000 yen or so. What time are you usually free?"

"I get off school around 4:45 or so. And that's if my friends aren't dragging me along for a misadventure or I'm studying."

"And on weekends?"

"I'm free unless something comes up."

Sojiro nodded, satisfied. "Okay, then. I open up shop early in the morning, but I at least expect you here around 6:15 or so." he said, laying down the rules. "I'll give you some leeway on Mondays and Saturdays, but you should at least show up at least twice a week. I may not have the most customers, but every now and then, I tend to get a rush." Akira nodded in understanding. "Oh, one more thing. I'll need your contact information."

"Okay."

After the quick exchange, Sojiro allowed the boy to leave. As he did, Sojiro looked at his retreating back, which disappeared as the door closed behind him, bell ringing in response. "Never would have thought *he* would be the one Niijima-san told me about." Sojiro remarked in bemusement, stroking his beard in thought. "He's not too bad. Then again, he's living under the same roof as as the student council president at his school and one of the best prosecutors in the country."

A sigh escaped him as he shook his head. A strange twist of fate, having the boy he was expected to look after coming to him for a part-time job. Around a few weeks ago, a customer had told him how their friend's son had gotten himself into a heap of trouble, landing him into probation. Imagine his surprise when the guy offered to pay him to look after the brat. Frankly, Sojiro was apprehensive of the idea. He had one kid to look after, and he was not about to let someone he didn't know anywhere near his daughter.

Thankfully, it never happened. As it turned out, someone else was

saddled with the problem child. Of course, he never would have expected it to be one of his frequent customers. Namely, Sae Niijima of all people.

How ironic.

'Still, the kid wasn't half-bad with his coffee.' Sojiro thought with mirth. *'It could use improvements, though. Eh, I'll see how he does next week.'*

His cell buzzed. He removed it from his pocket and smiled, answering the call. "Hey, Futaba. Do you need something?"

TO BE CONTINUED...

Confidants:

Sojiro Sakura – the HIEROPHANT: [The cafe owner of Le Blanc. He is very critical about Akira's coffee-making skills, but he honestly means well. He was initially meant look after Akira until Sae decided to become his caretaker.]

A/N: No, your eyes do not deceive you. This, my friends, is a double update. This chapter is meant to be a breather and a way to break off from the tension of last chapter, especially since we're coming up close to the end of the Kamoshida Arc.

The next chapter will be a breather as well. Afterwards, it's back into the Metaverse.

Also, before I end this chapter, I would like to point out something a few of you guys seem to be calling me out on. Allow me to state this, with confidence and confirmation so you all understand.

Akira...is NOT going to be paired up with Makoto!

Shocking, yes, I know. In fact, I will not lie. Next to Tae and Hifumi, AkiraxMakoto is my OTP. However, they are not to be paired in this

story. So who is Akira going to be paired up with? That, my friends, will be answered in the following chapters to come!

Also, I'd like your honest opinion: should I change Akira's name to Ren Amamiya, as that will apparently be his name for the upcoming P5 anime and Persona 5: Dancing Star Night?

Happy New Year, everyone! And as always, please leave a review! The more I get, the quicker I will be to update!

Confidant II: La Pendu – Part I

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Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

Confidant II: La Pendu – Part I

"I have to say, out of all the things I expected out of someone from your profession, possession of such elaborate gun models wasn't one of them. Then again, I suppose there's a lot I don't really know about you, is there, Akira-kun?"

The frizzy-haired teen didn't answer. Sae ust stared at him in scrutiny like before she closed her eyes, reclining in her seat.

"The complexity of those guns are beyond anything a mere high school student is capable of. There's also the fact that some of the models are not registered anywhere. To put it simply, they aren't based off of any known gun here in Japan. In other words, foreign models. Not uncommon, but their design was altered."

As she opened her eyes, they sharpened into daggers and leaned forward, propping an arm to the table.

"Answer me truthfully, Akira-kun...where did you get these guns?"

"...weapons?"

Currently, the Phantom Thieves sat in a booth at Big Bang Burger, having chosen to relax and take a breather from their Metaverse investigation. They had made decent headway, no doubt in part thanks to Ann's awakening.

Makoto blinked in surprise at Ryuji's suggestion, looking up from her magazine with a quizzical look. "Not be rude, but...why do we need weapons?"

"Well, it was just a thought." the blonde delinquent confessed. "Other than our fists and feet, we really have to rely on our Personas. And we get really effin' tired afterwards. So, I was thinking...wouldn't it be better if we had some weapons to arm ourselves, rather than rely on our powers?"

Ann hummed, taking a bite from her burger. "It makes sense, I guess." she confessed, showing approval for the idea. "It does get tiring, shooting off fireballs everywhere. I imagine it's worse for Akira, using two different personas."

"You have a point." Makoto conceded. "However, where would we procure them? And more importantly, how are you going to hide them?" Her eyes zeroed in on Ryuji. He promptly began to shrink in his seat, terrified of the woman who pretty much ran them on a tight ship. "I do hope you're not thinking of bringing such dangerous items to school grounds. ESPECIALLY since you and Akira-kun are on

thin ice as is!"

Immediately, Ryuji held up his hands in defense. "N-no! No no! I wasn't thinking that! I swear!"

"For your sake, I hope so."

Morgana snickered inside Akira's bag. "He's so whipped."

"And while we're on the subject of thin ice..." The not-cat creature yelped when Makoto directed her gaze to him, fur standing up straight. "Just so you know, Morgana, if any of the students or staff catch you, I won't save you."

"Ack! J-Joker!" Morgana looked at his psuedo-landlord with pleading eyes. "You'll save me, won't you?!"

Akira gave him a brief look, barely even a glance, before going back to his food, wisely choosing to stay out of this. He knew better than to cross Makoto. There *had* been a reason other than her status as Student Council President as to why he gave her the code name of "Queen."

"Et tu, Joker...!"

"A-anyway!" Ryuji returned the conversation, back on track. "If we get weapons, we don't need to rely on our Personas as much. And that means, we won't get tired as easily, right?"

"It would make our lives easier." Akira gave his two cents, tossing a fry into his mouth. "But will it work on Shadows?"

Morgana smiled. "Kukuku... You have much to learn, my little disciples." he said, causing everyone to sweatdrop. Akira gave Makoto a small accusing look, no doubt aware where he had picked up his recent cheesy habits. She at least had the decency to look embarrassed as her cheeks flushed and turned away. "The Metaverse is a world based on cognition. So long as the weapon looks realistic enough, the Metaverse will regard it as real."

"Wait, really?" Ann asked, surprised. "So, say we follow Ryuji's idea. If we were to bring with us a model gun, for example, would it be an

actual gun in the Metaverse?"

"As expected of you, Ann-dono!" Morgana sighed heavenly, glad that it was his beloved Ann that understood. "Yes, that's correct! Even a toy knife would be regarded as an actual knife in the Palace!"

Makoto leaned back, folding her arms. "I see... If that's the case, then Ryuji-kun's idea has actual merit." She smiled widely, nodding her head as she turned to the delinquent. "I'm quite impressed."

Ryuji blinked, realizing she was praising him. "It-it wasn't nothing!" he said abashed, scratching the back of his head. "Really!"

"I, for one, am surprised someone like Ryuji thought of it." Morgana quipped, causing Ryuji's good mood to deflate and snarl at the not-cat creature.

"Keep it up, fur-bucket, and I *will* turn you into stew!"

"Excuse me! Your order's here!" the female voice of the waitress called as she approached the table.

Makoto blinked. "Eh? Wait, Akira-kun's? How long can one order...take..." she promptly trailed off as her mouth fell open, inviting any wandering fly to enter. Ann and Ryuji shared her look while Morgana's eyes widened to the point where they threatened to pop out of his skull. "W-what...on Earth...?"

Akira looked up, finding his food delivered at long last. Smiling and thanking her, he took the plate and set it down. As he grabbed a knife and fork, he noticed the looks on his fellow thieves' face and tilted his head.

"What?"

"...okay, dude." Ryuji broke the silence among them. "I know a few guys who eat a lot because of high metabolism and all that, but... *how the hell are you going to eat all* ***that*** ?!"

TakeYourTime

Sunday had arrived. The weather was slightly cloudy, but there was thankfully no report of rain anytime soon.

Akira had arrived at the Shibuya Crossing a few minutes ago and was currently leaning against the wall leading into the station plaza down below, fiddling with his phone. He was most looking for forums and sites about potential hotspots around Tokyo. He figured that if he was going to live here in this concrete jungle, he may as well try and learn more about the place. So far, though, the only real places of notable interest were Shinjuku, which was home to many brothels and bars – essentially a red-light district – and Akihabara, which was notable for its arcade and the various stores that housed electronics, along with a particularly popular maid cafe.

"Should probably stay away from Shinjuku." Morgana told him, reading over his shoulder. Since they were out in public, the cat was able to reveal himself and peered over him. "I don't think the Empress would like the idea of you being in that sort of place."

Akira raised a brow, looking at the cat strangely. "...Empress?"

"If Makoto is a Queen, then her older sister is an Empress." Morgana explained with a slight shudder. "And between the two of them, Sae is a thousand times scarier."

Well, he couldn't refute that. Sae had her moments, but it was in those moments he often remembered just who's house he was staying in. Either way, he shrugged and looked back at his phone, only to stop when he noticed something happening across from him, near the Shiba Statue Monument. He looked up and frowned.

Bullies...

There was really no other way to describe what was happening. What else could you call a bunch of delinquents ganging up on some poor kid?

TakeYourTime

"What's the matter, Kaoru-chan?" one thug, about a year or so older than Kaoru himself, with dark hair and an earring on his left lobe,

sneered as he rudely shoved him down to the ground. His back harshly hit the statue's base, causing him to yelp in pain. "Go on. Cry out for mommy! Oh, wait! You don't have one, do you?"

Kaoru, gritted his teeth as he mustered a glare at his bullies. He wanted to strike back, but he refrained. He was not going to give these bastards the satisfaction. He was about to open his mouth and retort a curse at them, which would no doubt infuriate them, but one of them kicked his leg rather brutally. He bit back a cry, grasping his knee as he tried to ease the pain.

"What a wimp." the apparent leader of the thugs remarked with a sneer. He was from the same school as Kaoru, as he wore the same uniform, except it was open with a pin attached to the collar, resembling a grinning devil. "I mean, seriously. What kind of guy just lets us do whatever we want to 'em?"

Kaoru gritted his teeth. He wanted to ram a fist into that smug face of his. Instead, he could only settle for something else. "At least I'm not the one wasting time by picking a fight with some helpless middle-schooler. Who's the pathetic one here, Kai?"

"What was that?!" another of the delinquents growled out, picking Kaoru up by the collar of his shirt, getting dangerously close to his face. "You looking to start something, you shit?!"

"What are you waiting for?" Kaoru challenged unflinchingly, trying his best imitation of his father. "Go on. Do it! You're just going to prove my point."

Kai's smirk turned menacing. "I guess you have a death wish after all." he said, approaching as he dug into his pocket. "Just let me tell you something: you asked for it..."

Kaoru glared back in defiance. The other punks snickered as Kai slowly pulled his hand out of his pocket, holding something in his hand.

He didn't get the chance to show it off, though.

"Hey."

In sync, their heads turned to find a young teen standing a bit away from them. Unlike everyone else in the Crossing, who was doing their best to ignore the sight, he stared back unflinchingly without fear nor intimidation. If anything, he looked annoyed. He was a little older than Kaoru, and much taller, having messy black hair and glasses. He wore a black jacket over a plain white v-neck with a pair of blue jeans, a bag slung over his shoulder. In one hand was a cell phone, which he held away from him and facing them, which showed that he was apparently in the middle of a phone call.

"I hate to interrupt your game and all, but if I were you, I'd beat it. I just called the cops about a bunch of punks causing trouble in public." the teen told them, causing the delinquents to panic. Kaoru's eyes widened at this declaration, wondering why some stranger would do that. "Unless you fancy explaining to the police why you were bullying someone in public and about to threaten him with a knife, I'd start running. Like, right now."

A few in the group clearly didn't buy it, but the others were quite nervous. Kaoru couldn't tell if it was a bluff or something else. Either way, it had the intended effect and result: Kai and his gang fled, bolting like bats out of hell, though not before Kai turned around and dragged his thumb along his neck, indicating that this was far from over.

Kaoru sighed in relief, though he soon winced as he tried to get up. His leg throbbed in discomfort from having a foot stomping on it.

"Bunch of jerks..."

TakeYourTime

"I must say, that was quite impressive." Morgana voiced his approval from the bag as Akira pocketed his phone, leaving Ryuji, who he had called earlier, in a confused state as he hung up. "And most of all, ingenius. Still, what a bunch of idiots. Who bullies someone in a place where everyone can see?!"

Their thoughts were in agreement. It was stupidity. Even worse was the fact that everyone pretended it wasn't happening.

It bitterly reminded him of his own circumstances.

He walked over to the middle-school student named Kaoru and bent forward, offering his hand. "You okay?"

"...y-yeah." Kaoru nodded, taking his hand and pulling himself up. "Um, thank you. For a moment, I thought things were going to get hairy."

"They might as well have." Morgana chirped. "Especially since that guy was about to bust out a knife."

That had been the most distressing. He knew bullying could be quite serious. He had been a victim of it when he was in Elementary School, but pulling out a *knife* ? In such a crowded place?! Clearly, Tokyo truly was nothing like the quiet suburbs he was familiar with. Still, he was glad he intervened in time.

"Um..." Akira returned his attention to Kaoru who tilted his head to the side. "If, you don't mind me asking...why'd you save me?"

"Do I need a reason?"

"W-well, no, but..."

"Yo, Akira!"

The two males turned to find a familiar blonde rushing up. It was Ryuji, slightly sweaty as if indicating that he had been running. "Sorry I took a while," he apologized, a bit breathless. "Kinda had some trouble with a drunk homeless guy when I got off the station." He gave himself a small whiff before his nose crinkled. "Gah... Now I smell like booze."

"Don't worry about it."

"So, why'd you call me earlier? And what was that about the police?"

Kaoru's eyes widened in surprise as he looked at Akira. The frizzy-haired teen, in response, gave him a small grin before returning his attention to his teammate. "It was nothing."

Ryuji frowned before he shrugged. He then took notice of Kaoru. "Huh? Who're you?"

"O-oh, um, I'm...!"

Flustered, Kaoru was unable to form a response. Akira couldn't blame him, since he was still shaken up. Ryuji was understandably confused about his presence and looked to him for clarification. "Found a couple of kids bullying him."

"Ah." Ryuji nodded in understanding. "Well, anyway, you ready to head out?"

"Mm. What store are we looking for, exactly?"

"I dunno where it is. Supposed to be somewhere in the Street Center. I think it was called Airsoft?"

Kaoru blinked, looking at the two. "You guys...are looking for the Airsoft shop?" he asked, a bit surprised. Akira quirked an eyebrow. It was obvious he knew the shop in question that they were looking for. Perhaps even familiar with it. "W-why?"

"Oh, we're uh..." Ryuji scratched the back of his head. "Um, how do I put it? We're kind of..."

Morgana sighed. "Typical Ryuji..."

Akira shook his head in amusement. Meanwhile, Kaoru continued to stare at the two curiously before he looked to be mulling over a decision. After a moment, he nodded. "If you guys want, I..."

TakeYourTime

Airsoft was located in the back alley, just across the adjacent alley where the gym Ryuji frequented. The shop was quite small, though that was mostly due to the numerous items that littered it. There were a couple of mannequins, dressed heavily in camo gear and Kevlar, some posing wielding rifles or handguns. There were a few gacha machines as well, though the items inside weren't plastic capsules. Instead, they were outfitted with tickets or coupons, usually for a hot item that the owner had on his catalog.

The air reeked of gunpowder and oil, causing Morgana to gag, nostrils flaring. "Ugh, what is that *smell* ?!" he asked, repulsed. "It's positively filthy!"

Akira wanted to agree. He was horribly unused to such foreign smells invading his nostrils, especially so aggressively. He was unsure where to look exactly, taken in by the sheer difference that the store's decorations provided. It was his first time in such a store, so he was naturally thrown off by the vibrant, rebellious air it exuded.

His eyes eventually found the store owner, sitting behind a counter with his legs propped up the glass display case containing a wide variety of model pistols and revolvers and a magazine in his hand. He was a middle-aged man with gray hair, faint stubble around his mouth with sideburns and earrings. A tattoo of a gecko was printed on the left side of his neck near the back. He wore a gray hat with yellow ear defenders, a black turtleneck sweater, a long gray coat with a red peace symbol on it, blue jeans and dark boots. In his mouth was either a smoke or a lollipop, it was hard to tell from a distance.

"Hey, dad." Kaoru said with a hint of nervousness. Ryuji's jaw became unhinged as he looked at the boy in disbelief. Akira blinked, stunned for a moment before he looked back and forth between the store owner and Kaoru.

That was his father?

"...Kaoru." the man sighed as he set his magazine down, pulling out the white stick in his mouth, revealing it to be a blue-colored lollipop. "What have I told you about coming to the..." He trailed off when he turned to look at his son. His eyes narrowed sharply when he saw the obvious red bruise on his cheek. Almost immediately, he stood up and moved around the case, ignoring Akira and Ryuji altogether. Kaoru flinched under his gaze, especially when the man cupped his chin and turned his head to inspect it. "Who did this?"

"It-it was Kai..."

The man scowled. " *Most well-behaved school environment* my tight little ass." he muttered in distaste. "And? Did you fight back?"

"No." Kaoru responded almost immediately as his father stepped back. "I didn't want to give him the satisfaction."

The man smiled thinly. "Thatta' boy." he nodded in approval. He then took notice of Akira and Ryuji at last, slipping a hand into his pants pocket. "You the guys who helped him out of the scuffle?"

"It was most Akira here." Ryuji blabbed before he could say anything, much to his chagrin, patting his shoulder. He gave a small sigh as the man sized him up, eventually locking eyes with each other. He shifted under the steely gaze. Had he not known any better, he thought the man actually had a gun on him. "Um, are you the owner?"

The man didn't respond. Not at first. He just continued to study Akira before closed his eyes, seeing all he needed to say and nodded, looking at them both. "Yeah. I'm Iwai. So, what brings two high school brats to my shop?"

"A-ah, we're uh..."

"They were looking for your shop, so I brought them here." Kaoru explained. "I figured that they were customers."

Iwai hummed, scratching his chin. "Well, can't say I don't approve of having some fresh faces. Most of the guys who wander in here are usually hobbists or the usual otaku."

"Otaku...?" Ryuji wondered aloud, cocking his head.

"So, what're you brats doing here? If you want to browse, then git. I don't have time for window shoppers."

Ryuji scowled. "Geez, rude much?!"

Kaoru laughed nervously, looking back and forth between the two. Ryuji was clearly annoyed by the man's understandable nature. Morgana sighed in disappointment, shifting in Akira's bag while the teen himself just sighed again for the upteenth time. It was starting to become a regular thing.

Well, at least he had those old mafia films his father had to use as

reference.

"We're looking to buy model guns." he said, cutting in before Ryuji could make a snide remark or Iwai about to tear into them. "Preferably American models. A shotgun, a semi-automatic rifle, a revolver and a standard handgun, if you don't mind."

His words left the two adolescents blinking, staring at him with owl-like eyes. Even the not-cat creature was thrown for a loop by his answer.

The requested models had been based on his and Makoto's observations. They tended to liken everyone to certain positions. In this case, Ryuji would be an aggressive front-line brawler, getting up close and personal. That was best reflected by Captain Kidd, who rammed its ship into a poor Shadow before letting loose with a volley of electricity. Ann, meanwhile, was more like a supporter. Carmen was good at throwing fireballs, but like Orpheus, she could also heal injuries if they ever came up. Not to mention the fact the Persona used its whips and chains for some strange Shadow fishing.

Makoto, by her own admission, favored the revolver because of its decent range. While accuracy would be something of a problem, she more than made up for it with Johanna.

And as for himself...the handgun was simple. It had a moderate range, and it had good power to it. Admittedly, it wouldn't spread out like Ann or be as powerful as Ryuji, but he preferred the more simpler weapons.

Iwai, unlike the others, grinned. "Quite the order, kid." he mused, clearly impressed. "Mind if I ask what you intend to use 'em for?"

"Not for a bank robbery, if that's what your asking." Akira responded rather cheekily. "And it isn't to admire the work, either."

Iwai smirked, removing his hand from his pocket and folded his arms over his chest. "Pretty young to be a gun enthusiast, don't you think?"

"No. Not really."

"Well, aren't you a little brat?" the gunstore owner grinned. "Okay, then. Let me bring the catalog out. Oi, Kaoru. Head on home. And make sure you finish all yer homework, okay?"

TO BE CONTINUED...

Confidants:

Munehisa Iwai – the HANGED MAN: [The owner of the alleyway shop Airsoft. A rather shady individual, but invaluable to the Phantom Thieves for weaponry. Has a son in middle school.]

A/N : Whoo! Yes, got it done! And...oh my god. Seriously? It is 2:40 AM in the fucking morning?

...okay. Tell me what you guys think of the chapter, particularly how I introduced Iwai in this chapter. Tell me if there are any flaws, and I will get back to you. Please follow, favorite and review.

Now, if you excuse me...the sand man is calling my name.

...zzz...zzz...zzz...

17th Heist: Blazing Revolt

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Since time immemorial...they were known as,

"Tricksters."

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

17th Heist: Blazing Revolt

"H-hey, what the eff' is this?!" Ryuji cried, looking back and forth between Ann and her doppelganger. Akira didn't blame him. The sight was surreal as it was disturbing, especially when the doppelganger in question was dressed so...casually, for a lack of better words. Ann herself looked between a mix of disbelief and horror, staring at the woman who bore the same face as her as she continued to rub herself against Shadow Kamoshida.

There had been one thing that Akira noticed strange about the cognition of the blonde girl. Her eyes were glassy, as if she wasn't fully there.

No, that isn't right. He amended. *She doesn't see us at all. She's not even looking at us.*

"W-what...?" Ann whispered, taking a step back. "T-that's...that's me?!"

" What's the matter, Ann-chan?" the Shadow of Suguru Kamoshida inquired with a sickening leer, drawing pleasure from her face. **"Come on. Don't tell me you haven't dreamed of this happening."**

"N-no way!" came the hot refusal. "In your dreams, you sicko!"

"We may as well be in his dreams..." Makoto muttered in distaste as she raised her fists, noticing the Shadows slowly inching around them. "Looks like we're surrounded. Joker, any ideas?"

Akira didn't answer at first. He was racking his brain. Makoto had the best range with Johanna, and Morgana could certainly knock a few of them back, but he and Ryuji were close-line fighters. They wouldn't be able to support Makoto and Morgana and protect Ann at the same time. Would divide and conquer work?

"Take the girl and kill the rest." Kamoshida ordered. **"Don't leave a single one of them alive!"**

He scowled. They had to act now. "Ann, stick close! Ryuji, back me up!"

Makoto and Morgana already had an idea as to what to do. In seconds, the beefy Persona emerged from azure flames and sent out large crescent waves of wind that destroyed quite a few knights. Makoto was on top of her glowing motorcycle, charging straight into the line of fire. Kamoshida was well-guarded, so attacking him was out of the question. They needed to thin the numbers first.

" **Frei** !" Bluish-white energy began to soak into the Persona's wheels. From there, Makoto proceeded to spin around, thrashing

about like a madman and continuously performing donuts, releasing waves at her targets. One Shadow creeped up behind her, sword raised, before it promptly found itself smashed in the face, courtesy of Makoto slamming a wheel into its face and slamming it into the ground.

It was then reduced to black-and-red paste when the wheel ripped into its body, crushing the head.

However, not all of the Shadows were weaklings. Some had shed their armor, revealing their true forms. Some resembled dark-skinned red imps with long claws, tiny wings and something that Akira was not willing to go into detail about. Others had adopted the form of winged humanoid creatures with owl-like heads.

"Get the fake Princess!" a Shadow bellowed.

Ryuji promptly put his foot down on the matter as his Skull-themed mask burst into flames. The Shadow who said that found itself impaled on Captain Kidd's ship and its head blown clean off in a volley of thunder.. "Not a chance, asshole!" he roared. A knight came rushing up to him, swinging its sword. Though slow, Ryuji dodged with ease and rammed himself into its side, knocking it to the floor. "Joker!"

Orpheus brought down its enormous harp on the helpless Shadow, reducing it to goo. The white-masked teen turned his attention to the incoming owl-like Shadows. " **Maragi** !" Orpheus turned its attention to the Shadows and strummed its harp, creating miniature balls of flame that went straight for the Shadows. Some were destroyed and reduced to cinders. Others managed to survive, albeit wounded. In retaliation, one sent its own crescent waves of wind at Akira. The Persona took the hit and recoiled back, which transferred to the frizzy-haired teen.

At least I'm not being strangled or run through this time around. Akira thought whimsically, feeling pain erupt across his chest.

Two more knights came at him from either side. Even stunned with pain, he was still able to move. Deftly, he side-stepped and avoided one of the knights' swings, lowering down and sweeping at its legs.

The result was it falling on to its back. The other immediately went in and managed to score a hit, dragging its blade across his shoulder. Blood didn't spill. Instead, flames burned across his clothes.

Didn't mean it hadn't hurt like hell.

"Joker!" Makoto cried out. "Are you okay?!"

Akira scowled, hissing in pain as he clenched his teeth together before he jumped at the Shadow, grabbing its helmet and ramming his knee into its mask. The strike disoriented it and threw it to the floor, allowing him to grab the sword and drive the sword into its face, killing it instantly. Orpheus, meanwhile, grabbed the fallen knight as it tried to pick itself up and threw it to its allies before strumming its harp again, creating more balls of flame that promptly exploded in the Shadows' face.

Ann watched in amazement as they fought. She had seen them fight before, but seeing them fight like this was something else. Ryuji standing in front of her protectively while the ship-riding pirate charged recklessly into its foes and blew them away with bolts of lightning. Morgana darting around, scimitar in hand while Zorro kept the enemy at bay. Makoto riding on her Persona, practically demolishing any that came in her way. Akira, who was moving smoothly between any Shadows that got too close before sending them flying with his Persona.

It made her feel envious. How in the world did they manage to obtain that kind of power? Could she have that kind of strength? That bizarre ability? If she had it, then maybe she wouldn't have to feel so helpless like she did right now.

If she had that kind of strength, then maybe... Then maybe Shiho wouldn't have...!

"Look at you all, fighting so hard just to protect one little girl!" Kamoshida laughed, throwing his head back as his gold eyes danced with amusement. **"I bet Ann-chan must feel so special! Like a princess right about now!"**

Ann scowled. "Shut up, you bastard!" she hissed. She wanted

nothing more than to smack that arrogant look off of his face. It was because of him that Shiho was...!

Kamoshida laughed again, this time with scorn. **"What's the matter? That anger doesn't suit you at all! You should be more relaxed, like she is!"** To Ann's immediate shock and disgust, Kamoshida pulled the Cognitive version of her closer, one hand coming up to fondle her breasts while the other hand slid down her stomach, reaching towards forbidden territory. The sight was enough to fill everyone present with disgust and fury. The Cognition moaned, which was little more than disgusting noise to Ann's ears. **"See? At least she's obedient, like that Suzui girl was. Well, *before* she decided to do something stupid."**

"Y-you...!" It was bad enough what he was doing was more or less what he thought of her. But to hear him badmouth Shiho? It nearly sent her flying into white-hot rage. "You *fucker* ! I swear, I'll-!"

"You'll *what* ?"

Something in Kamoshida's voice had changed. Enough so that Ann suddenly found herself stopping.

Ryuji cursed as a Shadow rammed its shield into him, knocking him onto his back. He let out a cry of pain when the Shadow pinned him down with its foot, sword raised. "Captain!" he cried hurriedly. Before the Shadow could bring down its sword to end him, the Persona slammed straight into it at full speed, sending it flying right into Orpheus' path, where it was promptly reduced to a stain on the wall with a well-timed strike from its harp. Akira then offered the blonde delinquent a hand, pulling him up to his feet. "Thanks..."

"No prob." Akira smiled back before he turned his attention to the group of Shadows. "We've thinned them out. Somewhat..."

"Yeah." Ryuji nodded before he looked over at Ann. "Hey, Ann! You doin' fine?!"

"That's a stupid question to ask, don't you think, Sakamoto?" the Shadow of Suguru Kamoshida snickered. **"How can she be fine? Especially when she did absolutely *nothing* to save her**

friend."

"You shut your mouth!" Makoto howled over the roaring engine of her Persona. The Shadows started to crowd around Akira, Ryuji and Ann. Morgana was too far away to reach them in time. Scowling, she revved up the engine. "Mona, hop on!" The not-cat creature threw the Shadows crowding him away with Zorro before bouncing over to the brunette, landing on her shoulder. Power began to swell on Johanna's wheels. "GUN IT!"

The ground beneath Makoto was ripped apart as she sped right through the gathering numbers, some unfortunate enough to be run over. She slid to a stop next to her friends, standing beside Ann protectively. "Is everyone okay?!"

"We're fine..." Ryuji replied. However, Makoto knew better. They were getting exhausted. These kinds of numbers were way beyond them. Akira in particular looked tired, as he had been switching back and forth between Orpheus and Arsene when one suited his needs the most. She glanced at the Shadows and grimaced, noting that, despite having greatly reduced in number, the majority of Shadows were those that had casted off their armor. Some looked far stronger than others, evident by the fierce red glow that surrounded them.

"There's too many..." Morgana whispered with an edge in his voice, hopping off. "Bah, if we only had one more, we could clench this...!"

"As if you thieves can stand against me!" Kamoshida snorted, still feeling up the Cognition of Ann Takamaki, which was now moaning loudly like a whore. Any other time, the males present would have found it arousing. After all, Ann was quite the beauty. However, present circumstances and the one causing her to moan only made them feel uncomfortable and sickened. **"What could you possibly do? Face it, you're all just running on fumes at this point! Did you really think I wouldn't have prepared for the next time you idiots came crawling about my castle?! These are my best soldiers!"**

"My God, do you ever shut up?" Akira rolled his eyes as Arsene floated next to him, claws brandished wickedly.

"Face it, you pieces of trash. You're already doomed." the Shadow gloated before it paused, stopping its lewd actions to his "mistress" as he rubbed his chin before a nasty gleam ran through his eyes, matched by his toothy grin. **"But, if you give up Ann-chan, I might be persuaded to let you go..."**

Ryuji bared his fangs. "Fuck you!"

"But isn't she a burden?" Ann winced at that, especially when she realized that Kamoshida wasn't looking at any of them anymore. He was looking only at her. **"She pretended not to notice how her friend was suffering. I mean, honestly, was I even remotely subtle about the injuries I gave Suzui? You would have to be an idiot not to notice!"**

"T-that's...!"

Ann's shoulders shook as she shook her head. "Y-you're wrong..." she muttered in denial. "I...!"

"Face facts, Ann-chan. You're just like me! You only use others to get what you need in life!" Kamoshida told her, waving his arm about in a grandoise manner. **"The faculty knows damn well what I'm like, but they all look the other way! Do you know why? Because they *profit* what I bring! It's why that fool Kobayakawa lets me do whatever I want. Because of me, Shujin Academy started to bring in more and more students. More volleyball stars began popping right out the floodgates! And the teachers all share the credit for creating fresh new bloods with wonderful futures ahead of them! All of that is made possible *because* of me!"**

Makoto's fingers curled into fists, trembling as her nails broke through the screen. Blood dripped to the floor as it crawled down her knuckles. If looks could kill, Kamoshida would be dead a hundred times over. "You scum..."

"The whole school knows who your parents are." he continued, unhindered. **"Satsuki Takamaki is one of the most well-known models in Japan, with her husband being of equal reknown as a former novelist! Suzui had talent, that much was certain.**

Everyone on my team practically looked up to her. Even I saw how good she was. She would have gone far. Maybe even to nationals and earn a medal herself." Kamoshida then developed a smirk, leaning off of the Cognition while leveling a leer at her. **"Isn't that why you hanged around her? Because you wanted to mooch off of what she could be in the future?"**

"You're wrong!" Ann cried, clamping her hands over her ears. "I'm not like that! I'm...!"

"Ann, don't listen to this bastard!" Ryuji shouted at her. He then looked at Kamoshida, pointing a finger at him. "And you! Quit messing around with my friend! She is *nothing* like you! If anything, she's a thousand times better than you!"

"Are you so sure about that, Sakamoto? The way I see it, Ann and I are quite alike! Of course, the only difference is that she doesn't know the difference between fight and flight. Suzui would've been just fine, if she had learned to *listen* ..."

"What?" Akira blinked. "What're you talking about?"

Then it dawned on him, as it had on the others. Ryuji's face went pale. Makoto looked like she was going to be sick. Morgana looked positively livid. Ann had ceased to listen, as her hands had been clasped over her ears. Kamoshida could only smirk, showing off his pearly white molars, which resembled fangs more than anything. The image that was now in Akira's head was enough to incite a bubbling fury in his heart. If the gathering dark energy that suddenly began to writhe around Arsene's hands was of any indication, the Persona felt his feelings and more.

Is, is what he said true? Ann thought, tears stinging at her eyes. *Was I...just using Shiho?*

Ever since she came to Shujin, people looked at her differently. Partially because of her parents' reputation, but most of it seemed to just come from her appearance. At first, everyone thought she was a yankee. Somehow, people found out that she was of some mixed blood, and suddenly, the treatment turned worse. She didn't know what to do. She could only just block out the whispers and looks

people gave her way.

And then Shiho Suzui came into her life, and suddenly things became brighter. The girl was so much more talented Ann ever was. She could also be very blunt when she wanted to be. Hell, the first thing Shiho had ever said to her was, "You're painting sucks." Normally, Ann would have felt offended, but those words were the most beautiful thing she had ever heard since the day she came to Shujin. She brought newfound light into her life. Things suddenly seemed more enjoyable. A few people even saw her for whos he was, not the quarter-American foreign girl.

But, ever since Kamoshida came...

The worst part about what he said was true. She knew that Shiho had to be getting those bruises from someplace other than practice. They were just way too severe. Yet she just turned her head, as if pretending to ignore it was happening. It was hypocritical of her, she knew. After all, she refused to accept Kamoshida's constant offers to go back to his place, all because she wouldn't stoop to that level.

But...was it because of that that Shiho was pushed into a corner? That she couldn't see any other way out?

Is it...all my fault?

Come now, is that really something you should be pondering?

Ann blinked. *'W-what the? Is that...my voice?'*

Even if you and that worthless man are the same, what difference does it make? Does your heart not feel regret for being at that young girl's side?

Ann thought back to Shiho. The sight of her as she was put on a stretcher, carried off into the ambulance before it drove away and vanishing into the distance. The memory of it made her heart ache with grief and anger, knowing that it was Kamoshida who was responsible. Kamoshida had no remorse for what he did. He didn't seek forgiveness, not in the least. Ann didn't wish to associate herself with someone so heartless. Not with someone who treated

his own students like they were just disposable pawns.

Even if they were the same, by even the smallest degree...

Shiho Suzui was irreplacable! She was everything to Ann!

How DARE this bastard even think she was trying to take advantage of her friend like that?!

There you go. That's the spirit. Now, let me ask you this. Will you forgive this man?

"Like hell..."

"Hm?" Kamoshida tilted his head, noticing the fury in Ann's eyes. **"What's the matter, Ann-chan? Have something to say? Perhaps begging for-"**

"Shut the *fuck* up!" Akira and the others jumped at the fiery passion that burned in Ann's voice. Turning around, he found her eyes blazing with newfound resolve. An unyielding fire was lit inside those eyes. An anger that could not – would not quell, not even if Kamoshida got on his knees and begged for mercy. "I don't want to hear another goddamn word out of your mouth! I will never...ever...forgive you for what you've done! I am not some toy you can play with!"

"And I'm going to make you *pay for what you did to Shiho you pompous bastard* !"

Ah, there it is... The fiery spirit I've been waiting for!

ba-bump

Ann suddenly found herself clutching her head began to ache. It felt like something was trying to break free from inside. Her blue eyes were swallowed by a golden color. Something that immediately made Kamoshida fearful as his eyes went wide and the color drain from his face. **"Not again!"** he cried, stumbling back and pushing the Cognitive Ann Takamaki to the floor in his haste.

"No way..." Ryuji stared at Ann as she kneeled on the floor,

watching while she thrashed around and holding her head, groaning and whining in pain. "Her too?!"

"Kill her! Kill them now!"

"Don't think so!" Morgana huffed as he immediately put himself and Ann, blue flames dancing around him. Zorro rose from behind him, its small rapier in hand. "Zorro! Blow them away!"

The others followed suit. Makoto defended her friends when they were left vulnerable, intercepting Shadows with Johanna. Ryuji and Morgana were tired and exhausted, their heads hurting from all the mental energy they were putting into maintaing their Personas. Even so, they percevered as their Personas laid waste to the enemy, winds hacking them apart and thunder bolts obliterating them to pieces. Akira was the most exhausted, sweat trailing down his face while Arsene cackled with glee, both at the prospect of a new Persona emerging to join the fray and the anger that was blossoming in Akira's heart. With each poised strike, a Shadow was torn asunder by its claws.

It's taken far too long. Tell me... Who is going to avenge her if you don't? Forgiving him was never the option... Such is the scream of the other you that dwells within...

Ann hissed as the pain continued. Shakily, she stood back up on her feet, a hand still on her head. With unfocused eyes, she glared at what was ahead of her. Faintly, she could make out chains circling around her. Wrapping around her body, as if trying to restrain her. "Yeah..." she said after a moment, feeling something swell up inside of her. It was warm, like a fire. Pleasant, but chaotic. "I hear you, **Carmen** ."

I am thou, thou art I...

Blue flames lapped at Ann's face, encroaching the sides before slowly converging to the center of her forehead, all the while leaving behind what appeared to be a red mask with pointed cat-like ears.

There is nothing to be gained from restraining yourself. Now, let your burning passion run wild to your heart's content, until

every boorish thing in your path is reduced to cinders!

The mask fully formed. Thin fingers grabbed hold of the edge, and with a swift tug, it was torn from her face. Ann cried, feeling a burning pain erupt across her face as blood caked the upper half of her face. Then everything around her exploded into azure flames, releasing a shockwave that sent any and all nearby Shadows flying.

"God dammit!" Kamoshida whimpered, backpedaling away in fear. **"Not again!"**

The flames receded. There, in the midst of the inferno, Ann stood in a tight-fitting red leather suit, exposing a fair amount of her cleavage. It bore a cat-like motif, evident by sharp claws at the ends of her fingertips, covered by dark pink gloves. A small tail was attached to the part where her tailbone shoud be. Marked across the suit were silver zippers. Her eyes were closed for only a brief moment before they opened, revealing her blue eyes. Behind Ann stood a tall, imposing figure – a woman with pink skin and wearing a more detailed, decorative panther mask, golden eyes dancing with mischief and mirth while a lit cigar hanged in its mouth. Its hair was in the same style as its summoner, only much larger and with a ringlet style. Like Ann, its attire exposed an ample amount of its bust, perhaps even more so. Despite its much barer presentation, the outer half of the body part was covered in some kind of black material. It was hard to tell what it actually was since it over was around its shoulders and provided a collar before disappearing along the arms and body of a red and black dress with a few designs all over the body.

The arm and stomach were nearly blended in with the rest of the body. Black was the main color that took over the two areas. But within such a dark area, the only color to be provided as well were red hearts littering the dark color while there would be a strip of light-pink adjacent of the color vertically. The same could be said for its heeled boots except around the bottom, the actual heel and tip of the footwear being crimson red. The rest of the dress had one layer of cloth overlapping another layer about five times. Red was once again the main color, but then bright pink (that looked like orange or peach) and black highlights helped make the dress look more appealing. Around its waist were several large and small roses with

a long thorny vine wrapped around her body.

Where such vines led to was a bit of a surprise.

The first vine led to some kind of male figure in a suit being used as a footstool for the lady. The male didn't seem to be bothered or love the treatment. He wore a formal suit with a red-bowtie and the vines were wrapped around his neck. The most peculiar thing was that his head was a metal box in the shape of a heart as his eyes were also that shape but his mouth was round and had bars like a jail cell.

The second vine was the same, leading to a male that looked identical to the first. But the secondary object floated in the air, dangling yet looking mesmerized by the thing that had captivated him.

"Whoa..." Ryuji's jaw hanged opened, kissing the floor as he stared at the sight. Akira shared his sentiments. The Persona looked beautiful – easily matching that of a femme fatale. Especially when he saw that it looked quite enticed by the idea of bringing pain to Kamoshida. "That's her Persona?"

Ann took a step forward. In response, Kamoshida took three steps back. "I'm going to make you pay a hundred times over." she swore to him as she swung her arm in anger. "I don't give a damn who you are! I won't let you stomp over my feelings for Shiho, or my own feelings! Now *burn!"*

Carmen's eyes twinkled as it brought a gloved hand to its lips. Sparks danced across its fingers before it promptly blew a kiss at the Shadows, even winking.

In the next second, two knights were burned to cinders or utterly annihilated in a fiery blast, kicking up smoke all over the place.

Morgana leaped back to avoid the flames from touching his fur. Ryuji immediately backed away as far as possible. "Jesus!"

And the flames didn't stop from there. Spheres of fire danced around Carmen for only a moment before a flick of a hand sent them flying, straight at the gathered Shadows. Some managed to escape, only

singed but others were burned to a crisp. One Shadow, an owl-headed humanoid, attempted to retaliate by gathering wind around its hands, preparing to send it flying at her. Before it could, however, Carmen narrowed its eyes and threw its arm forward, palm aimed right at the shadow. The vine in its hand twitched before it suddenly moved, snapping forward like a snake aiming towards its prey. It wrapped itself around the Shadow, capturing it in its grasp. The humanoid figure even latched itself to the Shadow, as if to prevent it from escaping. Carmen tugged and swung it around, sending it flying into a group of knights before promptly throwing an Agi their way, destroying them completely.

Ann didn't stop. Even when she felt a haze wrap around her mind, as if strangling her, she didn't stop for a moment. Fire after fire, more flames erupted into her field of vision. Shadows were being destroyed left and right. The others watched in awe, unable to tear their eyes away from the sight.

"Man... Look at her go." Ryuji whispered in awe. "She's practically beating them by herself! And she just got that thing!"

It is impressive... Akira admitted silently before casting a worried glance at Ann, noticing how with each spell cast, she looked more and more tired. *But how much gas does she have left in the tank?*

His answer came shortly after another fireball, this one seemingly bigger than all the others. Carmen held it above its head with both arms, Ann mimicking the action before she threw it straight at the remaining group of Shadows. They didn't even stand a chance as the resulting explosion of flame consumed them whole, leaving behind only a trail of scorch marks and smoke. When the smoke settled, Kamoshida stood there by himself, lying on the floor and looking at Ann fearfully, tears brimming.

"You're next..." Ann promised menacingly.

The Shadow cried out in panic. **"Guards! GUARDS!"** Scrambling to his feet, Kamoshida ran far away from the area as possible, vanishing down the corridor.

The sight made the blonde-haired girl bristle with rage. "Get back

here you..." She tried to take another step, but suddenly, all the energy and adrenaline that filled her body suddenly went out. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head and fell forward.

Makoto quickly stepped forward, grabbing Ann before she could hit the ground. Carmen immediately vanished into a flicker of blue flames, flowing into Ann's face and forming back into the red cat mask. "T-Takamki-san!"

"She's fine!" Morgana assured her. "She just fainted is all. She must've used up all of her strength, taking out all those Shadows."

"I'll say!" Ryuji chimed with a wide grin. "That was freakin' amazing! D-did you see the way she just blew them all up?! Man, she's like a walking stick of TNT!"

"Nevermind that!" Makoto snapped at him, causing him to yelp in fright. "We need to get her out of here! It isn't safe! And after the commotion we caused, Shadows will definitely be running over here!"

Akira looked over his shoulder. Already, he could hear the hurried sounds of footsteps and clanking metal. "Agreed. Let's move." Walking over, he pulled Ann's other side over his shoulder, helping Makoto move her along as they fled the scene.

TakeYourTime

An hour later, Ann had finally stirred from her short slumber, tired and exhausted. The group had chosen to convene at Central Street, grabbing a bite to eat at the local Big Bang Burger in order to alleviate some of the lingering tension.

"So, that was Kamoshida's Palace..." Ann muttered, steeling reeling from the crazy series of events. "It's still so crazy to believe. I don't think I would have believed it if I hadn't seen it for myself."

"Yeah, tell me about it." Ryuji quipped, tossing a fry into his mouth. "It's way freaky. We practically shit our pants first time we were there. Didn't help we ended up getting lost in the dungeon of all places." He shook his head, sighing. Even now, he still felt

overwhelmed by that moment. "Anyway, how you feelin'?"

"Better. Still kind of exhausted, but I'm fine." Ann told him.

Morgana poked his head out from Akira's bag, looking at Ann with worry. "Are you sure, Ann-dono?"

"Ann-dono?" the girl blinked before she recovered. "Um, yeah. Really, I'm fine. Also... Is this really Morgana?"

Makoto giggled. "Quite the sight, no?" she asked in amusement. "Even I didn't believe it at first, but it really is him. Still, moving back on topic, we really had a touch-and-go moment there."

Akira nodded in agreement. That had been far too close for comfort to his liking. They couldn't just rush in blindly without a plan anymore. Especially when their lives were on the line here. He rubbed his shoulder, still feeling the pain of when the Shadow slashed him across the shoulder. He was thankful that there was no cut, which he no doubt owed to his Persona, but even still, he needed to be more careful.

"The Shadows really are no joke." Ryuji muttered worriedly. "We really gotta be careful from now on. Still, using our Personas is pretty freaking tiring. I can keep mine out for, like, maybe six minutes tops just for ramming crap before I start to feel tired."

"Same here." Makoto took a sip from her drink, eyes narrowed. "Obviously, using our Personas takes away mental strength. We'll have to find some other way to deal with the Shadows and try to conserve our fighting strength. Especially if we're going after Kamoshida's Treasure."

Morgana let out a pleased sound, flicking his tail. "Indeed. And now that there's five of us, our odds of success are quite high!"

"Five of us...?" Ryuji cocked his head. He looked at the group gathered at the table before he realized who the cat was talking about. "W-wait, Ann?!"

"Who else? She awakened to her Persona, yes? And she has more than enough reason to take down Kamoshida like we do?"

"Wait just a-"

"It's fine, Ryuji." Ann cut him off, her smile gone and her eyes sharp. "I know the risks involved. To be perfectly honest... Kamoshida did have a point. Deep down, I knew I what was happening to Shiho. But I was just like everybody else, looking away and pretending I wasn't seeing a problem." She sucked in a breath, her hands gripping the edge of the seat tightly. Her knuckles turned white. "I don't want to be like that anymore. I know I'm a hypocrite, now, and I don't want to go back to being like that." She raised her head, meeting everyone's eyes. "I want to make Kamoshida pay."

There was nothing to say. What could they say to such devotion and angry passion? The others looked at each other, but made no arguments against Ann. Instead, they simply nodded in unison. Ann smiled widely when they offered her one as well.

"Alright, then." Ryuji chuckled, leaning forward. "With the five of us, that shitty pervert doesn't stand a chance in hell!"

"Damn right." Akira smirked, adjusting his glasses.

Makoto smiled in confidence and Ann pumped a fist, clearly eager for the next journey into the Palace.

Not a single one of them noticed the azure blue butterfly sitting outside the fast food restaurant, situated on the windowsill next to the group's seat before it flew away.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Persona Compendium

Andras - Devil Arcana: [One of the 72 demons of the Goetia. The great Marquis of Hell, he appears where there is battle to stoke the hatred within soldiers.]

A/N : *stares at [Updated: Jan 8]*

...okay. I have no excuses to offer this time. What I can offer you, however, is assurance that this story isn't dead. And the Kamoshida Arc is about three or four chapters away from completion, which means we'll be able to get into some proper breather territory. Someone complained about how the tension was completely cut away when I followed Chapter 17 with two light-hearted chapters. I'm sorry if you didn't like it, so how about taking this chapter as an apology?

The next update, or updates I should say, should be coming sometime soon. I can't say when, as my college semester started early this month, so I won't have much time to work. Plus, I have other real life stuff to tend to. That being said, I am determined to finish the Kamoshida Arc at least this month, or before Halloween! MARK MY WORDS!

By the way, which one of you beautiful sons of bitches made the TV Tropes page?!

No, I'm serious. Someone went out of their way to make a TV tropes page for this story! Seriously, I'm starting to feel a bit spoiled that somebody's gone out of their way to make pages for mine and my bud's stories. If you want to add in anything new, check out Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to's TVTropes Page.

Speaking of stories, I'm working on a new one. I know I shouldn't, but damn plot bunnies won't leave me alone. It demands that I write it. Before you ask, its a Persona 5 story, but with a twist: it has everybody's favorite Rule-Smashing Pun Machine! Look forward to Persona 5: Black Moonlight everyone!

Before I finis this chappy off, please check out mine and Daemon of Wrath's newest story: unORDINARY Thieves! I'd make us both really happy if you told us what you think!

As always, please review and tell me what you thought of this chapter! Later tricksters, and I'll see you all in the next update!

EDIT: Forgot to mention this, but certain chapters have been given a

minor fix. I won't say which ones, but I did a little bit of clean up when I noticed some errors.

18th Heist: Regicide, Part I

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Now, one such group of Tricksters has emerged, in order to rise up against this ruin.

They are known simply as…

" ***The Phantom Thieves of Hearts."***

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

18th Heist: Regicide, Part 1: The Setup

In the following days after Ann awakening to her Persona and joining the group in their efforts to take down Kamoshida, Akira and Makoto had arrived at Shujin to find some strange circumstances. More specifically, the stares the former had been receiving all day

as classes went on. And it wasn't just the students, either. When Ushimaru passed by him in the hall on his way to second period, the man wrinkled his nose and gave him a mild glare, worse than the one he usually gave, while Kawakami gave him this disappointed, pitying look.

It hadn't been until lunch break when Makoto had gathered the group in the Student Council Room that he understood why.

"Wait, we're getting suspended?!" Ryuji cried in outrage, the news coming completely out of left field. "W-why?!"

"Who else would it be?" Morgana scoffed, shaking his head before his blue eyes narrowed sharply. "You two challenged Kamoshida directly. Joker even managed to spook him pretty badly, which put his Shadow on high alert."

"And given this is Kamoshida we're talking about, two defiant *pieces of garbage* walking around in his castle doesn't sit well with him." Makoto said, arms folded over her chest with a glare in her eyes. "I also overheard him arguing with Principal Kobayakawa about removing me from my position as Student Council President. He's clearly fed up with us at this point."

Akira grimaced. This was bad. Bad in so many different ways. A teacher angry at him was nothing new. He experienced it quite a few times, but this time was different. His life was literally hanging on by a tiny strand of thread. A screw up and his life was over. With expulsion now hanging over his head like some damn guillotine, he was on borrowed time.

Has Niijima-san heard the news? If she had, then he was already screwed over. The woman made it blatantly clear what would happen if he so much as fumbled even once while on his probationary period. *She hasn't said anything, so I'm in the clear. But for how long?*

Whatever the case was, they had to act. Now.

"When will me and Ryuji be kicked out?"

"My best guess is on May 2nd. It's the next teacher's meeting."

Ann bit her lip. "That's in less than two weeks. Can we really pull this off?"

"We don't have a choice." Makoto said. "It's almost time for lunch to be over. Let's meet after school in the alley. Ryuji-kun, about that thing you were talking about the other day..."

TakeYourTime

Akira examined the knife in his hand. It was light and fairly long, but little smaller than a butcher's blade. It was quite sharp, despite it being little more than a toy. At first, he doubted its capability until he had used it against one of the wooden crates. The result was a long, sizable cut that was etched deep into the wood. It was yet another thing about the Metaverse that amazed him. If it recognized a toy knife as the real thing, he could hardly wait to see how it would see a gun.

"Hm, not bad..." Makoto gave the serrated knuckle dusters on her hands a try, throwing a few punches at the empty air. "They're quite light."

"We sure they'll work?" Ann asked with some skepticism, looking at the whip in her hands. It looked like an ordinary toy you'd see in a shop, maybe for cattle and whatnot. "I mean, the guns look real enough, but..."

Morgana chuckled, waving a paw. "Don't worry, Ann-dono. In the Metaverse, even something as meager as a toy knife will be real. That being said, I would advise you treat your weapon with caution. Last thing we need is for you to hurt yourself."

"R-right..."

Ryuji gave the lead pipe in his hands a swing, as if he were aiming for a home run. "A bit on the heavy side, but it'll work." he grinned, hoisting it on his shoulder before he looked over at Ann. "By the way, Ann… I'm surprised you haven't complained about your outfit yet."

The girl made a pitiful sound that sounded almost like a whine. "Please don't remind me. I'm trying to ignore the fact that I'm dressed up like some Catwoman wannabe." It also didn't help the fact that the suit also *really* exposed a fair amount of her cleavage. She had tried to cover it up, only to find that the zipper only went up to that amount of space. The clip-on tail she could live with, and maybe the risque feel her outfit had, but really, it was in horrible taste. Not to mention it was a little too tight around her chest. "So, just to refresh, this mask is my Persona? When it isn't fighting for me, I mean?"

"Indeed! And while on the subject, we need to give you a code-name!"

"A code-name?"

"To prevent Kamoshida from recognizing you." Makoto explained. "Apparently, so long as we have our Personas, his Shadow has a hard time recognizing us, so it makes him less suspicious of us in reality. While we're here, we use codenames."

"Oooh… So we're like vigilantes?" The thought brought to mind the anti-hero of a cartoon she used to watch, where the heroine used her feminine wiles and skills to achieve her goals. Even if they were somewhere within the morally gray area. She always dreamed of growing up to be like that cartoon heroine, even if she wasn't the best role model. Thus, their current situation greatly reminded her of her childhood dream, as well as the fact that she was actively living it as we speak. "That sounds awesome!"

Morgana huffed. "Correction. Phantom thieves. Unseen, in the shadows, and stealing from the truly despicable."

"So, basically, Sly Cooper." Ryuji snickered. "Sure, we don't have a hippo or turtle with us, but I think Kamoshida's the closest we got to a master criminal." Akira tilted his head. Hippo? Turtle? What did any of that have to do with this? "Anyway, for Ann's code-name… How about Sexy Kitty?"

Makoto promptly glared at him, causing him to shrink. "...do you want to get smacked?" she asked in a cold voice, fist clenched and

taking a step forward in a threatening manner.

Ann showed equal disapproval to the name. "Hell no!"

"How about Cougar?" Morgana offered. "You're wearing a cat-mask, and they're one of the most powerful wild cats around!"

"Maybe, but… Doesn't Cougar also refer to..." Ann trailed off, best leaving the sentence unfinished for her own sake. "W-why not Panther?"

Akira cocked his head. "Why Panther?"

"I, uh, kind of life Panthers. They're big, powerful, and they're known for their loyalty."

"That settles that, then." Makoto nodded. "Welcome to the team, Panther." Ann smiled widely, giving the group a V for victory sign with her hand. "Now then… Joker, do you still have the map for the castle?" The frizzy-haired teen nodded as he walked over, producing a piece of parchment from his pocket. Handing it over to Makoto, she set it down on a nearby wooden crate, unfolding it to reveal the full schematic to everyone. "Assuming they haven't figured out that we used the aqueducts to get into the upper levels of the castle, we should still be able to make our way back. If I'm reading this right, the quickest route to the Treasure would be through the central area here. The tower's right next to some place called the Sanctuary. If we can get there, we should be able to sneak right into the tower."

"Okay, sounds simple enough." Ann hummed. "But, on the off chance the aqueduct is being guarded, what do we do?"

"Then we take the long way around, I guess." Ryuji scratched his cheek. "Look here. It's gonna be a hell of a detour, but the Left Wing wraps all the way around the castle, up to the back. There's also apparently an elevator somewhere there, if I'm reading this right."

Morgana smiled. "Very impressive, Skull! As a matter of fact, Joker and I discovered it while we tried to secure a route to the Treasure. Unfortunately, it's locked down. From what we overheard, there are

three guard captains who have the keys. They're quite powerful, so if you decide to go after them, you better be prepared for it. It would make our way into the upper levels easier, though. The decision rests with Joker in the end."

"What about this part here?" Ann asked, pointing to the faded out part of the map. "It doesn't look like it's mapped out, or as detailed."

Makoto scanned the section intently, leaning back as she put a hand to her chin. "It looks like an underground level. It looks like it connects to the dungeons, though. Unless we have to go there, I think we should stick with the main paths."

"Alright, guess we've got a plan of attack." Ryuji said, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "So, we got ourselves some weapons. We good to go?"

"I think we are." Morgana nodded. "Look alive, you lot! From this point forward, there's no more going back. Either we win, or we all die."

"A bit morbid, don't you think?"

Ann giggled. "He isn't wrong. Let's go!"

Akira nodded and followed behind them, only to stop ten steps into the grounds when he noticed something... *off* . The rightmost area next to the drawbridge looked strange. Well, more so than it should be. It felt like there was something there. He could also feel something pulsating inside him, as if reacting to something.

It felt like...something was calling out to him?

Blue light shimmered into his field of vision. A door appeared, standing in the open space. It was shimmering, almost as if it were some sort of mirage. It resembled a cell door, as it only consisted of a frame and metal bars.

"What the..."

His back pocket suddenly felt warm. Looking over his shoulder, he found a faint glow emanating from the pocket before he dug inside

and pulled something out. To his surprise, it was the aquamarine key that Igor had given to him. *I remember leaving this on my nightstand back in the apartment!* He thought in shock. *How in the hell…?*

"Yo, Joker!" Ryuji called, walking over to him. "You doing okay? You look confused."

Akira looked at Ryuji, then at the door. Did he not see it? Was he the only one who could see it? He stared down at the key in his hand, then remembered Igor's words. That he would enter the Velvet Room of his own accord.

Perhaps now was the time to get some answers.

"Could you give me a second? I just need to clear my head for a bit." he offered a lame excuse. Ryuji seemed to buy it, no doubt believing he was still panicking over the fact that he was in deep water more than anyone else here. The blonde delinquent nodded and walked back over to the others, who had looked curious as to what he was doing. Sighing, he walked over to the door and slipped the key inside the keyhole.

The door opened with a loud creak. Not a single person besides Akira himself heard it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Morgana's ears twitch, looking around as if having heard something. Strange. Perhaps Morgana was the only person to hear it? Regardless, he looked at the door, noting how there was a blue void inside waiting for him.

Without further ado, he stepped forward, allowing his body to be swallowed by the light. To the others, it looked like he was just standing there. But to Akira, he was traversing through a hall lined with chains, all curving around him and moving of their own accord. There was seemingly no end in sight before a blue butterfly passed him by, hovering around him before moving up ahead. A light awaited him, almost like a beacon.

Then, when he approached, he found himself once again in the Velvet Room, with Igor sitting behind his desk and Lavenza beside him.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room." the old man greeted. "It has been quite some time." Akira nodded in acknowledgment. "It seems you've found yourself in quite the bind, no? Perhaps a sign that the ruin is already descending upon you."

"What is this ruin?" Akira asked. "You keep mentioning it. What is it, exactly?"

"You've already seen a glimpse of it, in the form of the Metaverse." Lavenza answered in her master's stead. "The unruly hearts of men, such as the one who now holds your life in chains."

"Indeed…" Igor's permanent smile seemed to twitch, as if wanting to grow in size. "The catastrophe that is heading your way has attempted to claim one life. And it will surely try to take more in an attempt to shackle you. But never fear, young man, for you already have the power to stand against it."

Persona . Akira realized. *Or maybe something more.*

The old man continued. "As you have no doubt come to realize, your power is very special when compared to your allies." The thought of Orpheus emerging in his time of need, and Morgana's words that a person could only have one Persona, echoed back to Akira, who nodded back and listened intently. "Think of this power to be like that of the number zero. Empty, but holding infinite possibilities within itself."

"The power to wield multiple Personas, and use them accordingly..." Lavenza continued, a smile touching upon her face. "That is your power. The power of the wild card."

"The wild card is not like that of others. It is a power that is strengthened through camaraderie. By forging relations with those who share a similar aesthetic with you, your "Confidants", your Persona ability will gradually develop!" Igor explained with delight. "In order to stand against the ruin, it will be necessary to forge bonds with those you can trust. Our duty is to help guide you whenever you require our aid, to ensure that you do not fall pray to the ruin. We only ask that you abide by the contract, and assume responsibility for any and all choices you make."

Akira soaked all this in. Forming bonds with people would help make him grow stronger? Wouldn't that be the same as using people for his own personal gain? He wasn't going to lie, the idea brought a bitter aftertaste in his mouth.

However, if using others meant he could take down Kamoshida, then so be it.

"As to our role..." Igor continued on. "We provide assistance through the art of fusion. Bring Personas here, and we shall use them to give rise to an even greater power. The stronger your Social Links, the more powerful the Persona will become." He nodded in understanding. Igor smiled in content. "Very good. Before you go, allow me to give you a gift. I believe you'll come to appreciate its worth, as you've chosen to pursue the path to becoming a most magnificent thief." The old man raised his hand. Akira felt his head spin for only a brief moment. The world shifted slightly, almost as if it was unraveling before everything changed back to normal. "Now then... Best you be off! You have a Treasure to steal, no?"

Akira nodded, still somewhat stunned by whatever Igor had done to him. "Thank you." With his gratitude expressed, he turned on his heel and walked back into his cell. The door slammed shut behind him before he found himself once again lost in the long dark corridor. Looking over his shoulder, he found the light that led him into that room diminishing.

Before long, Akira once again stood in the courtyard in front of the castle.

TakeYourTime

Unfortunately for the newly formed phantom thieves, Kamoshida had discovered their previous point of entry in the aqueducts, leading them into the Left Wing of the castle. Thankfully, the Shadows were few in number, though much to their disappointment and dread, they had all discarded their armors, revealing them in their full splendor.

"Ugh, great..." Ryuji groaned. "I guess we really must've pissed Kamoshida off if he's got his guards already out of their fancy suits."

Akira was inclined to agree. He scanned the mess hall, looking for any point where they could escape. Sadly, it seemed that wouldn't be possible. They would have to fight. They could make it into a short affair if they struck fast, though.

Looking at the Shadows, he noted that one of them looked like some kind of horse, only it lacked a lower half, which was more or less twisted vines that faded away as it went down. The other two were that damned black horse that impaled Arsene with its horn on his first visit here, and the last one being the pumpkin headed creature. Dealing with that one should be relatively easy. The Bicorn would be a bit of trouble, though. As for the first Shadow, though… He didn't have any information on it. It could be weak, or it could be strong.

Perhaps it would be better to avoid it somehow?

"Almost nowhere to hide in here, though..." he muttered. The mess hall had few hiding places that would let them sneak around. What little it did have would be nowhere near enough to get around undetected. Combat it was, then. Holding his knife tightly, calling out for his Persona, Akira was about to move when Morgana tugged on his coat. "Hm?"

"Hold on." the not-cat creature advised. He dug around in the utility belt strapped to his waist, as if searching for something, before taking out what looked like a small black pellet. "Here. This should make things a bit easier."

"What's that?" Ryuji asked quietly. "A distraction?"

Morgana smirked. "Of sorts."

Akira tossed it in his hand. If his knowledge of thievery would be of any help to him, then he had a pretty good idea what this thing could do. Thus, he threw it at the center of the room.

In the next second, smoke filled the area.

" ***What in the?!"*** a Shadow coughed, startled by the sudden plume. ***"What is this?!"***

"Come on!"

Morgana was surprisingly quick on his feet, not to mention very keen of his surroundings, in that he was able to move through the smoke like it wasn't there. The others had significant trouble. The not-cat creature jumped and brandished his scimitar when the outline of the horse-like creature came into view, blocking their path to the hallway. The first strike cut straight into its side, causing the Shadow to cry out in pain and alerting its comrades before Ryuji and Akira silenced it with a well-timed strike; one for the neck and another to the head.

Before the other Shadows could get their bearings, the phantom thieves quickly fled the mess hall, vanishing into the hall. Ann gently closed the door behind them, no doubt to hide their tracks.

"A smoke bomb..." Makoto hummed. "Old fashion, but it works wonders."

Morgana chuckled. "Always best to come prepared, Queen." he said, pushing his chest with pride. "Let's move on. The Shadows will probably be looking for us after that. We shouldn't be too far from the elevator."

"But didn't you say it was locked down?"

"True. But that isn't why we're going there. You'll see." he promised. Akira raised an eyebrow, but Morgana didn't seem keen on answering right now.

The group then moved on. They made sure to keep their steps light and their bodies hunched close to the floor. In the event they needed a quick escape, they'd be ready to spring to their feet and get out of there. Their Personas were also primed and ready for use, though when compared to physical exhaustion, expending mental energy was far more difficult.

And after Ann's recklessness in the use of her Persona, Makoto made sure to remind everyone, and in her best threatening manner, not to exert themselves past their limit.

A knight had rounded the corner, but it was a relatively quick affair. Makoto practically dealt with it all on her own, ending its life with

three strikes: a blow to the abdomen to cripple it, followed by an uppercut and then a straight that pounded it right into a wall. The helmet practically crumpled beneath the weight and was promptly reduced to goo.

"...you know. I'm really glad she's not using that on us." Ryuji whispered to Akira. The latter nodded in the utmost seriousness.

He briefly wondered if Sae also practiced a form of martial arts. If so, then it was all the more reason not to get on her bad side.

Akira quickly looked around to see if they were still in the clear before he gestured for everyone to follow. The further they went into Kamoshida's territory, the more anxious he started to feel. How far would they be able to make it into his Palace? How much time did they really have before he was expelled? The more he thought about it, the more he felt the need to push himself forward. His life was already put in a rock and a hard place, and if he got expelled…

Think about that later! He thought to himself as they turned around the corner. A "pulse" ran through him, calming him down immediately. Strangely, it wasn't the soothing pulsations from Orpheus or the more bold and angry ones from Arsene. Rather, it was from something else. What, he couldn't say for sure. Perhaps a new Persona? One he hadn't accessed yet? When did he get it?

Whatever the case was, he needed to remain cool. If he lost it for even a moment…

The group came to a stop in front of a decorated set of doors. Unlike the others, it was engraved in gold markings, and the handles looked like they were made straight from diamonds. Ryuji whistled. "Pretty fancy looking, ain't it?" he asked. He went to open it...only to find that the handle wouldn't budge. "Huh?"

"Locked." Makoto assumed. She took out the map in her hands. "This leads straight into the back of the castle, and where the elevator should be."

"So, what do we do?" Ann asked. "Break it down?"

Morgana shook his head. "Don't bother. Even if you used your Persona, this thing is reinforced. Instead, we do it the old fashion way!"

"Old fashion way?" Akira asked. The not-cat dug through his utility belt again and produced another item. To everyone's amusement, it was a lockpick. "Of course." He stepped aside, letting Morgana work his magic. In the meantime, everyone stood alert as they kept a close eye out for any nearby Shadows.

"Man, I'm so anxious..." the blonde delinquent grimaced. "On the off chance Kamoshida kicks the bucket here, what's gonna happen?"

Makoto bit her lip, shifting in her spot. In truth, she had been doing her best not to think about that. She didn't want anyone to die. Not even Kamoshida, despite everything he did. Yet what they were going to do had some serious risks. "I don't know." she confessed. "Joker said he would take responsibility, didn't he?"

"Wait, what?" Ann gasped. "W-why? Isn't he on probation?"

"He is. And that's what I'm most worried about right now." the Student Council President said. "If Kamoshida does die from a mental shutdown and Joker turns himself in… That's it for him. There won't be any second chances."

"It won't happen." Ryuji cut in with a frown. "We just gotta make sure Kamoshida doesn't die. B-besides, Mona said it himself, right? It's only an off-chance."

"Still..."

Akira, of course, had heard none of it. Instead, he was busy watching Morgana work his magic on the door, as the not-cat had requested. "At first, it may look simple," he explained. "But it's quite complicated, depending on both the lock and the quality of the lock pick your using. The one I'm using right now was something of a rush-job. Flimsy materials and all that. One careless mistake, and it'll snap."

"Hm..." Akira leaned in, interested. "And the lock?"

The not-cat scoffed. "A lousy excuse of one. Kamoshida seems to rely more on his manpower than anything else. Back to the point, though. The key is to listen closely for little clicks, like the pieces inside the lock and whatnot. You need to be extra careful, though, when using them. One wrong move, and you might end up making things worse."

Morgana continued to fiddle with the lock for a moment before he twisted the thin piece of metal in his hands. In the next second, a click was heard. Joker twisted the knob and pushed the door open. "Nicely done." he praised Morgana, who smirked.

"You'll be able to do this too, you know." he told Akira. "After all, you four are under my tutelage. Besides, I've got a personal investment with you, Joker." The frizzy-haired teen tilted his head, confused. "You're unique. You pick up things faster than most, and you have the ability to use multiple Personas. It's quite rare. If you ask me, you have all the qualities of a fine Phantom Thief!"

"Don't get too excited, fur bucket." Akira replied. "This is a one-time thing. After Kamoshida's dealt with, it's back to living normally." Or, well, as normally as possible, anyway.

Morgana seemed unconvinced. "Regardless, for the duration of this little heist of ours, I will be teaching you everything I know." he said with a wide-grin. "I'll make a thief out of you yet, Akira Kurusu. Count on it!"

TakeYourTime

The phantom thieves had eventually arrived in a spacious room, mostly empty save for the wooden benches and little decorations. To the far side of the room was the elevator, which immediately garnered disgust from the others, save for Morgana and Akira who had both seen it. The reason why was partially due to the fact that the four corners of the elevator, which connected the ceiling to the floor of the platform, were composed of busts that consisted of nothing more than a female torso, clad in a shirt and gym shorts, and emphasized the posterior and chest greatly.

"Ugh..." Ryuji gagged. "Now that is just disgusting."

"So this is what we need to reach the upper levels, huh?" Ann said. "But we need a few keys to get it working, right?"

Morgana nodded. "That's correct. Each is held by a Captain. There are three. The problem here is where they should be."

"One of the Captains is in the dungeon." Akira said. "We learned that by eavesdropping on one of the Shadows' conversations. The second supposedly does routine patrols in the Main Hall. We don't know where the third one is."

"So, we have two out of three..." Makoto hummed, folding her arms. "But what about the third…?"

"More importantly, do we even got enough time to do that?" Ryuji asked skeptically.

"We do if we split up." Morgana said, causing everyone to blink. "It will be quicker if we act independently. We'll split into two teams. One team will go after the Captain in the Main Hall, and the other will go for the Captain in the dungeon."

"We sure that's safe?" Makoto asked with a worried frown. "We do have our Personas, in case things get dicey, but..."

"Have ye a little faith, Queen." Morgana said reassuringly. "I'll be sneaking around, seeing if I can figure out where the third Captain is. I'm the stealthiest of the bunch, so it shouldn't be too hard sneaking around."

Ryuji raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you get caught?" he brought up.

Morgana hissed. "That doesn't count! Anyway, Team A will be Queen and Skull. Team B is Joker and Panther."

"Makes sense." Makoto hummed, understanding the logic. "I can back up Skull if things get too heated with Johanna, and Captain Kidd is powerful up close and personal. Ann has a lot of reserves when it comes to using her Persona, and Joker's Persona ability makes him quite diverse. In that case, we'll take the dungeon. The cramped space should force the Shadows to fight up close."

"Alright, then." Morgana smirked. "Let's get to it! See you guys back here!"

With a bounce, Morgana was off, running towards a random a direction. Makoto and Ryuji both bid their friends good luck before returning to the hall. Akira shared a glance with Ann, who seemed a bit surprised, but nonetheless pleased with current events. "Guess I'll be in your care." she said, smiling. "Let's do our best, Aki-er, Joker."

"Same to you." Joker replied with a bow. "Shall we get going, milady?"

She giggled. "Oh, you're such a charmer~!" The two then set off, making their way to the Main Hall.

TakeYourTime

While the teens were out traversing a parallel world in order to save themselves from Kamoshida, other events were occurring in the real world. Sae Niijima sat with Goro Akechi, the famed teenage detective, at a small table at a local restaurant in Shibuya. It had been relatively close to work, and Sae was somewhat partial to their food, so she decided to go here to focus on her work. Akechi had been more than happy to come with, if only because Sae offered to pay and they had a chance to discuss work.

[-in other recent news, Tohru Adachi, a former law enforcement officer from the Inaba Police Department, was released from prison this month.] the TV commented while Sae typed away at her laptop, going through documents and reports for her latest case. **[Adachi-san was confirmed to have killed two people during his time in the quiet suburban town, including former local television announcer Mayumi Yamano, who had been involved in a scandal with former Council Secretary Taro Namatame, who is now mayor of Inaba, and Saki Konishi, a second-year at Yasogami High who discovered Yamano-san's body. Many people were shocked to learn that Adachi-san, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment, was declared a free man a month prior to his release. The officer in charge of the murder case involving Adachi-san, his former partner Ryotaro Dojima,**

has offered no comments on the matter.]

Sae paused briefly, looking up at the TV with a narrowed glare. "Unbelievable..." she muttered in disgust. "They allowed a man like that to walk free?"

"I have to agree with you on that." Akechi said, showing some interest on the news report. "I've read up on that particular case. Not only did he kill two people, simply because he was bored out of his mind, but he even caused the emergence of a copy-cat killer. Namatame-san received a lightened sentence for his crimes of kidnapping high school students he believed were being targeted, and the copy-cat killer was eventually caught, partially thanks to evidence." The brunette detective put on a thoughtful face as he leaned in his seat, a hand on his chin. "You know, it really is quite strange. The only actual evidence they had on Tohru Adachi being the culprit behind the serial murder case was his own testimony. Though his statements matched up with facts about the case, most of the things he claimed were somewhat far-fetched, as if he were embellishing details."

Sae looked up from her laptop, staring at Akechi in surprise. "...you seem to know a lot about a case that was out in the countryside." she remarked. "Especially one that took place five or six years ago."

"I must confess, the only reason I know so much was because it was the case my predecessor was involved in." Akechi replied bashfully, scratching his pink-tinged cheek. "And it's perhaps my personal favorite case to study on. Did you know that, unofficially, the ones who caught Tohru Adachi were actually high school students? Including Shirogane-senpai, one of them was Rise Kujikawa-san during the time she went on a year-long hiatus."

"That explains a lot..." Sae rolled her eyes. "Now, back to the matter at hand."

"Ah, yes..." Akechi nodded, his face turning serious in spite of the smile that appeared shortly after. "The Mental Shutdown cases, wasn't it?"

TO BE CONTINUED…

The Confidants

Morgana – the MAGICIAN: [A bizarre creature. He knows much about the Metaverse, but lacks any memories of his own. The most experienced among the group.]

Persona Compendium

Kelpie – Strength Arcana: [A horse-like fairy of Celtic folklore that lives by the water. It drowns those who ride on it, but is a valuable mount if you can tame it.]

19th Heist: Regicide, Part II

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Now, one such group of Tricksters has emerged, in order to rise up against this ruin.

They are known simply as…

" ***The Phantom Thieves of Hearts."***

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

19th Heist: Regicide, Part 2: Thieves

The trip to the Main Hall was somewhat of a short affair. The group had split up rather than use the same route they had earlier, given that they were in the far back of the castle. Admittedly, Akira was concerned for Makoto and Ryuji since they were going in with little

support. It would have been easier for them to just hunt down their targets individually, rather than separately. A better chance at success. But they were short on time and he had no choice but to accept that fact. They needed to hurry and reach the Treasure as soon as possible.

"I hope Queen and Skull will be okay." Ann said as they walked, mindful of their surroundings as they kept an eye out for any Shadows lurking about. "Ryu-" she cursed, nearly saying her teammate's name out loud before correcting herself. "Skull can be pretty hotheaded."

"He'll be fine." Akira replied. "Queen has him on a leash." It was mostly a joke, meant to help lighten the mood.

And it worked. Ann was giggling, nearly laughing as well, but she otherwise managed to keep quiet. "Yeah. I'd hate to see what might happen if he ticks her off bad enough… Hey, Joker?"

"Mm?"

"When we're done with the Palace, do you think you can come with me someplace?" Joker stopped, looking at Ann in curiosity. She was fidgeting, and perhaps anxious. "If it's okay with you."

Akira tilted his head, wondering what could have her so worried, but nodded. "Sure." Ann let out a relieved sigh. "C'mon. Let's get that key."

"Righto!"

TakeYourTime

The Shadow didn't even know what hit it. Literally. All it took was a quick swing to its head and the Bicorn was reduced to black-and-red splatters across the wall. Ryuji didn't stop as he jumped back to avoid being struck by a bolt of electricity, courtesy of a tiny little girl in a blue leotard with fairy wings and red hair. He was about to call on Captain Kidd to try and ram her, but Makoto had beaten him to it as she destroyed the Shadow in one quick shot with her revolver, aiming right for the head.

"Wow..." the blonde delinquent said in quiet awe, watching her spin the gun around like some gun-ho western sharpshooter before slipping it back onto her person. "You're a real crack shot with that, aren't you?"

"It's fairly lighter than Joker's handgun." she replied coolly. "Of course, it still has relatively shorter range, not to mention less bullets."

"Been meaning to ask 'bout that...do we got unlimited ammo or something?"

"I have no idea. You better ask Morgana that." Makoto answered, walking ahead of him. "Anyway, let's keep going. We need to find the Captain that has one of the keys."

That, and she didn't wish to stay any longer than they already were. Out of all the places in Kamoshida's Palace, the dungeon was arguably the worst for her. The atmosphere alone was dreary and unpleasant, but the occupants were a reminder of her failures. Of how she woefully averted her eyes to the truth. Kamoshida's statements about how Ann was looking away from Suzui's abuse struck home for her as well. She should have – *must* have known about the abuse, but she pretended to ignore it like everyone else. It was easier just to pretend it never happened and continue on with life.

She hated this place. She wanted it gone. And she was going to make damn sure that Kamoshida never got away with his crimes.

Unlike the rest of the castle, the dungeon was lit by torches, making it somewhat hard to see. On the other hand, however, Ryuji, who seemed to be adapting the quickest to their newest occupation, managed to find a way to sneak past Shadows.

Namely, just blow out the torches. Their clothes were already dark enough, so they blend into the shadows with ease once they hid from sight. And when a Shadow was close to noticing something, they made sure to end them with quick ease.

One in particular had found itself with a broken neck, courtesy of a

powerful headlock. Makoto, with some embarrassment when questioned by an awestruck Ryuji, admitted that she was something of a yakuza film fan, so she knew pretty much the common ways to kill someone. And her aikido training worked wonders as well.

That, and the added strength her Persona gave her was no doubt a major boon as well.

After a few close shaves and dead Shadows, Makoto and Ryuji eventually found their target. The room the Captain was in was somewhat small, easily big enough to house a few dozen people. However, the sight behind him was enough to chill both of the teens, as the cognitions of Shujin volleyball students were found inside a cage, all strapped to a wall while the armored knights struck them with their armored fists.

"The *fuck* !" Ryuji whispered in anger. "I know these guys aren't real and all, but what the actual hell!"

"Calm down." Despite her words, Makoto saw that her own hands were trembling in anger. The only reason she hadn't acted was because of Johanna sending out a gentle "pulse", subsiding the anger in favor of tranquil fury.

Ryuji didn't look pleased, but he remained rooted to his spot behind the entrance, glaring at the Shadows while watching and hoping that every last one of them died if he glared at them hard enough.

" ***Must you be savages?"*** the Captain asked with annoyance. ***"You may vent your frustrations towards the prisoners as much as you want, but do keep in mind that King Kamoshida has*** **explicitly** ***asked us to leave them alive?"***

" ***Apologies, captain."*** the Shadow delivering the beating said in between punches. ***"I'll keep that in mind."***

"Assholes..." Makoto silently muttered while her eyes glanced around the room. *'One, two, three, four… Including the Captain, that's five Shadows. The Captain is a powerful Shadow, so it's best if we fight it alone. The question is how to kill the other guards.'*

Her mind went through several ideas. A distraction? No, that seemed to be the least feasible. Even if they could somehow manage to get the Captain out of the room, how would they prevent him from getting backup? The next idea would be to kill the other Shadows in the room, but that was also next to impossible. Especially since getting them out here would be quite difficult, including eliminating them one by one without the others noticing their absence.

What should they do?

Evidently, Ryuji was the first one to come to a conclusion. "I got an idea." he said, making her look at him curiously. "It's a stupid idea, but..."

"What do you have in mind?"

When he started to explain, Makoto felt a migraine coming on. She regretted ever considering this plan…

TakeYourTime

" ***Capture him!"***

"C'mon, assholes! Follow the thief!"

The plan was ludicrous, but it was insane the way it had become effective. Ryuji had more or less offered to become bait, luring the Shadows out of the room. The Captain was trailing behind them while the rest of his subordinates were leading ahead. Separating the Captain was tricky, as Ryuji had to push himself to the limits by turning sharp corners and performing feints in order to trip them off.

Makoto had improvised, via by rope that was coincidentally lying around. Why, she didn't know, but she was hardly about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

She did have to admit, it was certainly funny to see the Captain being lassoed and pulled away, the other knights to busy chasing after Ryuji. Assuming they were all weak, Ryuji could handle them with ease. She was nervous about facing the Shadow by herself, but she had faith that her friend would be coming back for her. If he

didn't, well, she'd have to give him a good smack on the head.

The Captain groaned, its armor clinking haphazardly as it pulled itself up to its feet. Raising its head, it found Makoto directly in front of him, fists raised and legs spread apart. Her mask was also partially covered in blue embers, Johanna ready to be called on at a moment's notice.

"Welcome to the Brig." she said mockingly. "Care to give up your key?"

The Shadow growled as black fluids began to seep from its being. ***"Insolent fool!"*** The armor collapsed and the Shadow assumed its true form. To her disgust, it was a horned monster with an ugly face sitting on a toilet seat of all things, floating a foot off the air. The way the monster sat made it look like it was bored, but the crimson eyes it had were glaring down on her with madness and killing intent. ***"You will pay for raising your hands against King Kamoshida!"***

Makoto was nonplussed. Instead, she welcomed the challenge. "Bring it!"

TakeYourTime

Akira and Ann arrived at the Main Hall. The scene was enough to bring nostalgic memories back to the former, recalling how he wound up here inside this castle on his first visit with Ryuji and Makoto. It was strange how they'd find themselves here again. However, the memories were far from pleasant and they were already shoved away from his mind, tucked back into a corner.

"The Captain has the key we're looking for, right?" she asked, earning a nod. "Do we know what it looks like?"

"Captain Shadows are wearing gold armor, so..."

Unfortunately for them, it was going to be a needle in the haystack, as Akira learned when he took a peek inside the Main Hall, only to frown in distaste when he saw the Shadows patrolling the grounds.

All of them were wearing gold armor.

"Great." Ann hissed. "What do we do now? How're we supposed to find the Captain?"

To that, he had no answer. If he did have one, he sure as hell didn't know it. This was troublesome, that was for sure. How was he supposed to find the right target? Did they have some kind of distinguishing figure from one another?

" *...allow me to give you a gift."* Igor's words came back to him. *"I believe you'll come to appreciate its worth, as you've chosen to pursue the path to becoming a most magnificent thief."*

Akira furrowed his brow. What was this gift Igor had given him? Would it be of any use? He remembered the feeling that came to him when Igor had given it to him, whatever it may have been. He pursed his lips, trying to recall the feeling. The feeling of his mind unraveling, the world coming into sharper focus…

"Joker?"

Akira looked up and gasped. Faintly, he could make out a bright blue aura around Ann. Behind her, the spectral image of an inert Carmen stood by, behind her with its golden eyes locked on to him with a hint of amusement. He glanced over his shoulder to find Arsene smiling at him, the wicked flaming grin ever present. Orpheus stood beside him as well, arms folded and waiting patiently for the time when he'd be called upon.

What…?

This...this was unreal. What *was* this? Was this the gift Igor talked about? He looked into the Main Hall and found a similar phenomenon around the Shadows. They were surrounded by a dark red aura, violent almost.

One in particular, however, caught his attention. Namely, the gold light that was directly in its hip. It was thin, with two strips poking outward.

"...huh." Akira said simply. "This should come in handy." Ann stared at him in confusion. "I think I know who we're after. The Shadow by

the painting. He has the key."

"Really? How can you tell?"

"I'm not sure how to describe it, but… I think I can see *something* . Like an aura. I can see Carmen standing behind you." Ann blinked and looked over her shoulder, but found nothing. "I don't know how it works, but I know that guard has the key."

"Huh..." she said slowly before nodding. "Okay, then. How do we reach the guard?"

Akira smiled as he dug inside his pocket, holding up a few pellets. "We use these."

TakeYourTime

When Ryuji arrived, shortly after managing to lose the Shadows that had been pursuing him, he found Makoto cycling around the room on her Persona, avoiding ice blasts shot at her. Each blast created a spire that shot upwards, almost as if they were meant to impale her. Had she been any slower, she very might well have been killed. The strange demon that was sitting on the toilet released a roar as it sent out more ice blasts. She swerved, sweeping around in a full circle before she charged right at the Shadow.

" ***Begone, thief!"***

Ice gathered around him, but before it could-

" *Captain Kidd! !* "

Ryuji's mask erupted into flames and his Persona charged forward, ramming right into the Shadow at top speed. As a result, the ice blasts were off the mark, missing Makoto completely. Makoto went at full speed, light gathering around the wheels of her Persona. A roar ripped from her throat as she pushed Johanna up, spinning in mid-air and slamming the rear wheel straight into the Shadow's face. As a result, it was thrown straight across the room, slamming right into the wall. The wall gave way, crumbling and making the Shadow fall to the floor in a heap. Makoto landed back on her feet, mask reforming.

Ryuji ran over to join her, Captain Kidd still at his side. "Sorry I'm late!" he apologized hastily. "Took me ages to shake 'em off!"

"It's fine. You got here on time, Skull." Makoto smiled before she turned her attention to the Shadow, which floated back up, holding its head. "What do you say we give this guy a good thrashing?"

The blonde delinquent gave her a shark-like smirk, twirling his weapon around in his hand before settling it on his shoulder. "Thought you'd never ask."

" ***Insolent...thieves…!"*** the Captain Shadow growled. ***"You will not make it out of here alive!"***

A chilling wave of cold air settled over the area. Giant chunks of ice, jagged and spiky, began to form around him. "Scatter!" Makoto shouted quickly. Ryuji dived out of the way while Makoto dashed to the side, avoiding the cluster of ice. Upon impact, a giant iceberg formed, covering the entire back half of the room in ice. The Shadow wasn't about to stop, however, as it gathered another round of magic energy, ready to fire off another salvo. Makoto's eyes narrowed, hand gripping her revolver. "Skull! On my mark!"

"Ready!" Ryuji called back, a hand over his mask.

The Shadow raised its arms over its head, ready to send the two thieves to hell. At that moment, Makoto acted and took aim, pulling the trigger. The bullet struck true and struck the Shadow in the eye, causing it to cry out in pain. Immediately, the clusters of ice shattered apart, exploding in its face and trapping it inside its own ice. Makoto smirked. *'Thought so! With so much power gathered up, it needed to concentrate! With its concentration broken, it can't act!'*

And now, it was open.

"Skull!" Makoto shouted.

Ryuji grinned maniacally as Captain Kidd emerged in a blazing flourish, slamming its foot on the from of its ship and took aim, electricity gathering inside its barrel. It tipped its hat to the Shadow almost mockingly before it shot a giant bolt of thunder straight at the

Shadow.

As soon as it struck, the ice shattered and the Shadow let out a howl of scream. Then the room fell into dreadful silence as black chunks of ice cluttered the floor, shortly melting into black-and-red goop. Breathing a sigh of relief, Makoto holstered her revolver and walked over to the puddle. There was something glittering in the faint light.

"Here we go..." She went down to her knees, scooping up the item in question. It was a silver key of typical design, looking as if it belonged on a ring. "One down, two to go."

"Sweet~" Ryuji chuckled. "In that case, let's head on back to the elevator. By now, Joker and Panther are done."

TakeYourTime

Separating the Captain Shadow from the other guards had been easy. Morgana had given him a few smoke bomb pellets to use, so he used them to great effect. He had been gambling on this new sense of his, this *Third Eye* to see through the fog, but it worked like a charm. He found the Captain, and with Ann's help, they were able to swiftly pull it away. None of the Shadows ever realized what occurred, and even if they did, they made sure to cover their tracks by locking the door behind them.

Still, though…

" ***Hey! What's the big idea, rough housing me like that?!"***

Why was the Shadow a Pixie of all things?

Given their previous encounters with Captain Shadows, they had all been garbed in gold armor and exceedingly powerful. Instead, however, they were met with the tiny little figure from when they entered the Palace before. It was certainly strange, but not unwelcome. If anything, it made this quite easy. Akira already had his knife and gun out, ready to take the Shadow down in a second. Arsene wouldn't even be needed for this.

Ann, however, seemed somewhat hesitant. "Um..." she shifted her feet around, looking highly uncertain. "Sorry?"

" ***Sorry?!"*** the Pixie cried. ***"I think I got a bruise 'cause of you! Hrgh, this is why I hate troublesome brats!"*** Akira stepped forward, spinning his knife around, mostly to intimidate the Shadow. ***"H-hey, what're you planning on doing?! Y-y-you think King Kamoshida'll let this slide?!"***

"How's he gonna know if you're dead?" he retorted. The Pixie fell silent at that.

"Hold on a sec, Joker..." Ann put a hand to his shoulder. She knew it was a bad idea, trying to protect the Shadow, but she couldn't help it. It just didn't feel right to her. Then again, she had just started. "Isn't this a little harsh?"

"You can't underestimate them." Akira reasoned. "Last time that happened, it wasn't pretty."

" ***W-wait, you're not planning on killing me, are ya?!"*** the Shadow said, now growing nervous as sweat trickled down its face. ***"Look, I'm sorry for calling you a brat, okay?! L-let me off the hook, yeah? I won't say a word, I promise!"***

Akira rolled his eyes. Begging, really? He was about to raise his gun, but Ann looked ready to step in, making him frown. It was a bad idea, considering to let the Shadow off the hook. What if it was going to lie and attack them when their backs were turned? As much as Akira wanted to, he didn't want to risk the chance of what might happen.

"How do we know you'll keep your word?" Akira demanded harshly.

The Shadow winced at the cold tone in his voice. He made it perfectly clear that he had no intention of letting her escape. ***"Y-you can trust me!"*** she pleaded pitifully. ***"Here! I'll even give you the key to the elevator to the Upper Floor!"*** Hastily, she pulled out a silver key from somewhere on her person, tossing it to the two thieves. Ann snatched it out of the air. ***"There! Will-will you let me go?!"***

Akira gave her a flat stare. Ann, however, cut in before he could say anything. "Hold up."

" ***W-what?"***

"Do you think this is enough to bargain for your life?" Ann questioned. Akira blinked and looked at her. One moment she was trying to save the Shadow's life, and the next she was trying to push it to the wall? This was strange. "You're gonna have to give us more than that."

" ***W-what else do you want?!"***

Ann smiled sweetly. "Info." Now the frizzy-haired teen understood what she was getting at. "We know that we need three keys to open up the gate to the elevator. We know that one of the Captains is in the dungeon, but where's the last one?"

" ***H-huh? The other guy?"*** the Pixie stuttered. ***"Um, I really don't know. All I know is that he roams the halls whenever he wants. And its usually when the guards are screwing around."***

Akira hummed as he filed the information away for later. This was useful intel. Morgana would definitely need to hear about this. Maybe they could exchange information once they reconvened. Still, this was going to be inconvenient. If they had to cause trouble to get the Captain to show up by messing around with the guards, how long would it take? Which method would work best? Direct confrontation?

So tiring… Still, they had to persevere.

" ***S-so, will you let me go?!"***

Akira mulled over his options. It would be better to kill the Shadow, but...they did strike a deal. "Get going." he said, lowering his guns. "And make sure to hold up your end of the bargain."

" ***You..."*** the Pixie looked unconvinced. ***"You're really going to let me go?"***

"Do you want us not to?" Akira asked back with a raised eyebrow. The Shadow shook its head violently. "Then get going." The Shadow seemed unconvinced at first, but it then made its retreat, vanishing past the door. The frizzy-haired teen then let out a sigh as he ran a

hand through his dark curly locks. That was certainly something. Still, they had what they needed now. Assuming the others succeeded, they now had two keys.

Just one left to go.

As they prepared to leave, Ann stopped him again. "Hey, uh..." the red-clad girl figdeted, playing with one of her pigtails. "Sorry 'bout what happened back there. It's just..."

"I know." he said in understanding. "It's your first time fighting with us, and cornering a Shadow up close and personal."

"Y-yeah..." Ann nodded, slightly ashamed of herself. "I know they're our enemies, but I just can't help but feel sorry for 'em. From what you guys told me, they're just serving Kamoshida. They didn't ask to be bound in those clunky suits. In a way, I kind of feel sorry for them." She bit her lip, staring at the ground. "It kind of makes me realize...that could've been me. Or anyone at our school, really."

Yeah… Akira silently agreed, staring at the spot where the Shadow had been. *In a way, the Shadows are prisoners here too.*

TakeYourTime

A few minutes later, the phantom thieves returned to the room where the elevator was. "Yo." Ryuji greeted with a two-finger salute, Makoto trailing behind him with a satisfied look. "Good news, y'all. We snagged ourselves a key."

"Same here!" Ann met his look with a smile of her own. "That's two keys! Just one more, and we're a step closer to Kamoshida!"

"Mm." Makoto nodded. "The quickest way into the tower is through this Sanctuary on the upper levels of the castle. After that, everything should be cake walk. Now then, where's Mona…?"

"Right here!"

The group jumped as the bipedal creature appeared into their line of sight, practically leaping into view from the ceiling. "Shit man!" Ryuji cried. "Don't do that! You nearly gave me a freakin' heart attack..."

"How'd things go on your end?" Akira asked.

Morgana smirked. "Easy as pie. The Shadows didn't notice me whatsoever. How about you guys? Did you get the keys?" Ann and Makoto dug into their pockets, pulling out the items in question. "Nice. That's two out of three."

"We got a lead on the third Captain." Ann informed everyone. "Apparently, he usually sticks close to Kamoshida. The only time he comes running is when there's trouble brewing."

"I've heard something similar." Morgana nodded, crossing his arms over his chest. "The Shadows were talking about how they had to go through some kind of punishment when a Captain caught them slacking off."

Makoto frowned heavily, pursing her lips as she put a hand to her chin, deep in thought. "This sounds troublesome… How're we supposed to get to the last Captain?"

"What's there to think about?" Ryuji asked. "Sounds to me like we just gotta break shit and kill Shadows, take the key, and voila. The key comes to us!"

"Yes, but that means we'll have to fight. There's a lot we don't know. We have no idea how much ammunition our guns have here while in the Metaverse. Lesser Shadows are easily dealt with by hitting them a few times with our weapons, but the stronger ones require us to use our Personas. If we have to fight, we need to conserve our strength. And if this last Captain is powerful, we'll need all the strength at our disposal."

Ryuji deflated at Makoto's explanation. It was certainly quite the dilemma. "So, then what do we do?" Ann asked. "Do we cause a racket? Or...do we convince the Shadows to try and cause a racket for us?"

"What? Convince the Shadows?" Ryuji stared at Ann weirdly. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"Well, we did convince a Shadow to give us the key, so..."

"Wait, seriously?!"

Morgana cocked his head. "That...could work." he said, albeit with doubt. "The Shadows don't actually have that much loyalty to Kamoshida. Especially the weaker ones."

"So, they're more or less prisoners, just like the guys in the dungeon, then." the red-clad girl said aloud, causing the others to look at her. There was a fire in her eyes again, this one bearing determination. "In that case, what if we tried something like this? Akira's got this thing where he can *see* Shadows' strengths or something. If we use that, we can tell the Shadows apart, then confront the weak ones and convince them to try and stage a fight in the Main Hall."

"Hm..." Morgana closed his eyes. "An ability to tell Shadows' strengths, huh? Sounds like you've been holding on me, Joker!" A Cheshire-like grin appeared on Morgana's face as he pumped a fist(?) into the air. "Alright, let's give it a shot. In any case, dealing with the weaker Shadows will be pretty easy, compared to the other ones!"

TakeYourTime

Kamoshida's Shadow had been feeling restless. Ever since Ann's awakening as a Persona-user, he had ordered all guards to be on high alert. He shuffled staff around, forcing several others to abandon their shells and assume their true forms. It would be difficult for the thieves to move around unhindered this way. In fact, he was hoping they'd get themselves killed just by trying to break into the castle.

Even so, he couldn't shake off this feeling of irritation. Something just didn't feel right. Being the embodiment of his real self's dark and distorted wishes, formed from the depths of his own black ego, it could feel his growing anxiety and fear. But why? What reason was there to be afraid?

When he thought about what could make him feel so afraid, the first thing that came to mind was the troublesome transfer student and that white-masked kid. He couldn't remember the latter's face, but

he automatically associated him with the shitty brat that stood up to him. He didn't understand why he did that, but he knew one thing for certain: they were both troublesome little shits that annoyed him to no end.

" **Those goddamn brats."** he seethed as he twirled his wine glass around, sitting loftily in his throne. The Throne Room was truly a grand place. It was his epicenter, the very foundation of his standing in Shujin Academy. Though the throne was simple and small, his presence more than made up for it. **"Why is it that insist on getting in my way?"**

" ***My Lord."*** the Captain at his side bowed his head. ***"Pay these knaves no mind. Sooner or later, our men will capture them. And when we do, we shall execute them and make them an example."***

Kamoshida's Shadow smirked evilly at the mental image. **"You're right about that… But I still can't help but feel annoyed. Increase the level of security in the Sanctuary. I doubt the brats will make it that far, but it should make for some good entertainment."**

" ***Shall I bring in the Princess, for your evening fun?"***

" **No need. I'm not in the mood. For once."** And such a shame, too. He never once tired of playing with his Princess' body. Such soft, tender skin. Not a single blemish. A shiver ran down his spine, remembering the last time he had the opportunity to ravish her form. The sensation was a thrill, far more than anything he had felt when he took it upon himself to take the purity of the other maidens that threw themselves at his feet. But dammit, ever since those brats started to get involved, he found little enjoyment in taking it upon himself to fool around with his concubines! **"More importantly, my loyal knight… Did you make sure that the keys to the dumbwaiter have been distributed?"**

The gold knight bowed its head humbly. ***"Yes, my King! We also discovered the thieves' previous point of entry and sealed it to the best of our ability! Now, they will have no choice but to go about the determined routes!"***

" **Good! I want their heads on a pike! Especially the one with the white mask. For some reason, his face irritates me the most."** Kamoshida's Shadow declared.

Suddenly, the doors to the throne room were thrown open. ***"My King!"*** the Shadow cried. ***"There's-there's trouble in the Main Hall! It's a mutiny!"***

He felt his anger skyrocket. **"WHAT?!"**

TakeYourTime

Persuading the weaker Shadows hadn't exactly been easy. In fact, it would've been next to impossible to do so, were it not for Ren's newfound useful ability. He made a mental note to thank Igor profusely for it the next time he was in the Velvet Room.

Ann had been the one to successfully convince the weaker Shadows to cause a disturbance in the Main Hall. Seeing as how it was directly next to the entrance of the castle grounds, it made perfect sense to lure the last Captain there. Her acting skills were quite something, if perhaps leaving something to be desired. At times, they were worried she was going to botch the whole thing, but everything had worked out in the end.

Akira marveled at the sight as he and the rest of the phantom thieves hid safely in the corridor leading into the Main Hall. The Shadows were bickering amongst each other, loudly declaring slander against Kamoshida to demanding that he pay them more for their services, and other such things. It almost brought a tear to his eye, really.

This will so *piss him off* .

"Man, I wish I could see Kamoshida's face." Ryuji said, doing his best to hide his snickers so as to not be heard. "Who do you think he'll be more pissed off at? Us, or his own guards?"

"Hard to say." Akira replied with a cheeky grin. "But this'll get his attention for sure."

"I'm still surprised this worked." Morgana said in all honesty. "Ann-

dono really is something."

"Why thank you!" said girl beamed happily. "I guess all those modeling sessions paid off, huh?"

"I wouldn't go that far..." Ryuji muttered under his breath. Makoto didn't say anything, but even she felt that Ann's "acting" skills weren't exactly perfect. Still, neither was about to complain. "Anyway, what do we do once the cap shows up? It'd be a pain if we had to fight him while the other Shadows are around. What if rounds 'em up to his side?"

Makoto folded her arms. "I think we should be more concerned about the Shadows. From what Joker and Panther told us, it seems like he doesn't take disobedience well."

As it turned out – not even a minute later – that Makoto Niijima had been correct. Suddenly, the dissension had been quelled in little more than a second. Black-and-red liquid splattered all across the Main Hall, with several knights slaughtered in the blink of an eye. The phantom thieves were shocked by what they had seen, especially when their eyes caught sight of the culprit.

The Shadow, no doubt the last Captain they needed to defeat, strode forward. Like the red armored knight that had defended Kamoshida on their second visit, it rode atop a horse and was clad in armor, this time without horns and more reminiscent to that of European armor. Baleful yellow eyes glared out from beneath the eyeholes, and in hand was a long trident.

"What…" Ryuji found himself strangled, unable to breathe. "What the *fuck* ?!"

"He killed them..." Ann whispered in horror. "How could he…?!"

" ***What insolence..."*** the Captain hissed as his stead let out an angry whine while he swiped his trident, throwing the blood off of the implement. ***"You dare defy King Kamoshida? And for things so meager..."*** With a swing of its trident, the remaining stragglers were wiped out and their remains were splattered across the hall. It then directed its attention to the thieves, looking around the room. ***"You***

thieves, I know you are responsible for this uprising. Face me, or hide in the shadows like the cowards you are!"

Akira grimaced. "Guess we're found out."

"Then let's give him a greetin'." Ryuji growled, still peeved as they stepped out into the Main Hall. "Yo, asshat! Here we are!"

" ***Hmph..."*** the Shadow scoffed, its steed letting out a grunt. ***"You are foolish to defy King Kamoshida and try to persuade these fools."***

"They aren't your slaves!" Ann shouted hotly. "They're people as much as we are!"

" ***Nonsense. From the moment they set foot in this castle, they were meant to swear themselves to our glorious king! If they fail to meet our expectations, they are cut down where they stand!"***

Prisoners, no different than the slaves.

It seemed Ann had the right idea.

Arsene let out a wicked laugh in his heart, mask already burning to embers. "...I guess there's no more reason to talk, then." he said, holding a hand over his face as Arsene manifested behind him, claws seeping with power. "Let's go!"

There was no hesitation. The anger that burned in his heart was fuel for the fire. Akira was now dead set on making sure Kamoshida payed his dues twice over.

TakeYourTime

The past few days had been especially hard on poor Mishima.

Ever since word got around that Ryuji and Akira were going to be expelled and rumors of Makoto Niijima being stripped of her position as Student Council President started to circulate, the school had been in an uproar. Some were happy that the transfer student and trouble child were being tossed out, but others were questioning why

Makoto was being targeted. Mishima, of course, knew that the reason why was because she had also been snooping.

Kobayakawa had been flustered by this outcome, though. Once, Mishima had caught the overweight man fruitlessly trying to convince Kamoshida otherwise about the decision, but the volleyball teacher had ultimately won him over, just like all the other times.

That being said, Kamoshida had been unusually irritated all week, in spite of the fact that he had more or less made sure that Akira would never see the light of day again and Ryuji finally kicked out of school. He had been uptight and aggressive, which showed in their gym sessions.

As usual, he was singled out and made Kamoshida's whipping boy. To add insult to injury, Kamoshida called him to his office and beat the ever loving shit out of him. He was now sporting several bruises and a swollen black eye. Nothing a quick trip to the local pharmacy and nurse's office couldn't fix. He was lucky he wasn't suffering from a black eye, that was for sure.

Curiously, though, speaking of Akira, Ryuji and Makoto, the combination had indeed been an odd one. Mishima made sure nobody knew that Akira was staying with the Niijima family, so nobody understood why the Student Council President was hanging around a delinquent. Him hanging around Ryuji was a given, since they both shared a similar history and both hated Kamoshida.

Recently, however, the group had expanded. People have talked about seeing the two troublemakers, Student Council President, and even Ann Takamaki, Kamoshida's object of lust since the school year began hanging out together. A truly odd combination, one that got many people talking.

Mishima himself was curious, but he couldn't approach them. Every time he saw Akira and Ann, he couldn't help but feel shame. The former had no idea why his record was spread, and every time he saw Ann, he was reminded of the day Shiho Suzui tried to kill herself.

Even now, he was still seeing those dead eyes. It got to the point

where his parents recommended he start seeing a therapist and take anti-depressant pills.

By now, a week had passed since Kamoshida had declared his intentions. In spite of that, though, Akira and the others were not deterred in the least. If anything, they looked far more determined to make trouble for the bastard. Mishima felt envious and wondered what made them so courageous.

As he walked through the halls, nursing his still swollen cheek, he noticed how several students had gathered in front of the bulletin board.

"What is this? Some kind of prank?"

"You read it, right? It this a joke?"

"What does it mean, anyway? *We will take your heart* . That sounds kinda lame, don't you think?"

Mishima tilted his head and walked over. There were several red cards posted on the bulletin board. Some of which had a childish design of what appeared to be a demented shark-like grin with eyes peering out beneath a tophat. Others had a message printed on it.

"The Phantom Thieves of Hearts…?"

TO BE CONTINUED...

20th Heist: Take Your Heart (I)

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Now, one such group of Tricksters has emerged, in order to rise up against this ruin.

They are known simply as…

" ***The Phantom Thieves of Hearts."***

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

20th Heist: Take Your Heart (I)

The group had been exhausted. Their battle against the Shadow had been tiring, but they had eventually managed to pull it off. With all three keys in hand, they opened up the path to the upper levels.

Navigating it had been a nightmare, all on its own. Any and all Shadows that they encountered were free of their armor and in their true forms, making battling them slightly more difficult. Progress had been slow as a result, culminating a few days worth of effort.

Still, the experience was of great help. Each battle somehow made them more accustomed to battling the Shadows. They didn't use up much energy as they had before when using their Personas, and their physical abilities seemed to be even stronger.

Stranger still, their newfound physical capabilities were reflecting in the real world. As a sort of real world training session of sorts, Ryuji had asked Akira for help in getting back into shape, with Makoto's help of course. The two had more or less created a schedule for themselves to keep them in peek physical condition. The blonde delinquent did have a bit of trouble, at first, since his leg was busted and usually uncooperative, but otherwise the training sessions were beneficial.

It had also allowed Akira to time to get to know the two of them better. And more of a reason as to why he made sure he never pissed off Makoto anytime soon. The way she punched the living hell out of that training dummy had terrified both him and Ryuji something fierce.

Just how much pent up anger did she have?

Of course, they were hardly the only ones he got to know. As per his promise, once they had made some decent headway after gaining access to the elevators, Akira had spent the rest of the day with Ann.

The trip on the train was done mostly in silence. Ann received a few stares from their classmates, and Akira a few glares, but he otherwise ignored them. Ann was fiddling with her fingers, her face written with worry and nervousness.

He had a pretty good idea where they were going. And about ten minutes later, he was proven correct when they had entered the hospital.

The nurse had been slightly condescending when she saw them, but her tone had changed when Ann asked if it were possible to see Shiho. They weren't allowed to stay for long, since her condition was still critical, but it was enough.

Akira didn't like walking through the halls. It made him feel naked, and the open space in the hallway was slightly unnerving. It reminded him too much of the halls of the courtroom. The way their footsteps and hushed whispers echoed, however faintly, and how uncomfortable the tense silence was.

After a minute of walking, Ann and Akira found the room Shiho was in. She was lying motionless on a bed, strapped to a machine that beeped constantly and wires stuck in her body. A mask was over her face, clearing up and then becoming foggy before becoming clear again.

Ann's face was calm, but it didn't match her eyes. "It's pretty horrible, huh?" Ann asked, her voice shaky. "First time I saw her like this, I thought, she was going to die. The doctors say it's a miracle she's even still alive right now. They don't know if she'll ever wake up, though."

"I'm sorry..." Akira closed his eyes. "I should have done something. I knew something was about to happen to Suzui-san, but I..."

"You couldn't have known, Akira-kun." the girl told him, her eyes never leaving Shiho. "If anything, this was all my fault. Kamoshida was right. I knew what was happening to her, but I just looked the other way. I just pretended and thought it would be easier not to notice." Ann let out a weak laugh. It sounded so pitiful. It didn't suit her. "I'm a real bitch, aren't I?"

Akira's words came quickly, and unintended. "No, you aren't." Ann looked at him, surprised by how strongly he said those words. Even he looked surprised, but didn't let it stop him. "Kamoshida did this. Not you." He put a hand to her shoulder, as if to reassure her that none of this was her fault. "Besides, would a horrible person come see Shiho?"

She was quiet for a moment, but then shook her head. "No… She

wouldn't." she said, closing her eyes and sucking in a breath before she pressed a hand to the glass, as if to reach out and touch Shiho's hand. "I swear… I'll make that bastard pay for everything he's done, ten fold." Akira smiled at that. Ann pulled her hand away and smiled at Akira. "Thanks for coming with me. I would have brought Niijima-senpai or Ryuji, but I thought you'd want to see how she was doing. Senpai told me what you saw back in the Palace with Morgana."

"It wasn't a pretty sight, that was for sure." Morgana said, poking his head through the bag. Despite Akira's protests, the cat made it a point to travel with them everywhere they went, since it would be pretty troublesome to keep up with them on foot. That, and he oddly found riding around in his school bag fairly comfortable, along with the added perk of a luxurious home. That being said, both Akira and Makoto both agreed that they should tell Sae about him when they had the opportunity. "Are you sure you'll be okay, Ann-dono?"

Ann smiled and scratched Morgana's head, eliciting a purr from the not-cat creature, much to Akira's amusement. So much for his claims. "That's sweet of you to worry. But I'll be fine. Anyway, there's something I need to ask. It's about taking Kamoshida's Treasure. Will it really be as easy as it sounds?"

"If only..." Morgana sighed. "There are a few steps to take before we can take the Treasure. The first thing is the most obvious, that is to say securing a route to the Treasure. Second is to discover the Treasure's location. The Treasure will appear as a hazy mist of sorts. It's essentially formless. However, this is where the last and most important step comes into play. The most important aspect of a Phantom Thief!"

"What's that?"

"Simple!" Morgana's mouth curled into a grin. "A calling card."

TakeYourTime

True to Morgana's words, when they reached the Treasure Room – a stockpile of golden goods and coins sitting behind the Throne Room, the Treasure appeared as a mist. It was intangible at the moment, but Morgana had explained the basics to make it take on a

physical shape. That was to say, they had to make Kamoshida aware that the core of his reality was to be taken. This would be reflected in the Metaverse and force his Palace on high alert. On the positive side, however, the Treasure would take on a physical form, which would allow the thieves to rob it without worry.

Ryuji had expressed the utmost excitement for the calling card and fervently requested he'd be the one to write it. Naturally, Makoto had more or less demanded that she proof read it to ensure it wasn't too vulgar. Ann and Akira agreed to the plan and made sure to prepare for the upcoming heist.

This led to the current events, where Mishima looked at the bulletin board with the rest of onlookers. Gently sliding through the crowd, he pulled off one of the calling cards and read its contents.

"Dear Suguru Kamoshida, the king of lust." the calling card read. "You abuse your position of power and treat your students as if they are slaves. Members of your volleyball team are punished with beatings and female students are treated as little more than playthings. Therefore, we have decided to **Take Your Heart** . We will make you confess your sins with your own mouth. Sincerely yours, the Phantom Thieves of Hearts."

Mishima wasn't sure what to think of it. It seemed like a prank, and the logo left more than a little to be desired. *'But nobody would try to call out Kamoshida-sensei like this.'* he thought. *'Especially where everyone could see it. Who could've done this?'* He looked around, noting how some looked excited, others troubled and the rest simply bored or unimpressed. They obviously wrote it off as if it were some kind of hoax.

Perhaps that was why he could easily find Akira Kurusu, Makoto Niijima, Ryuji Sakamoto and Ann Takamaki hanging around near the stairs, looking at the gathered crowd with smirks on their faces.

It took him a moment to realize it – that they were the ones who put these calling cards up. To say that he was amazed by their boldness would be an understatement, but why would they do this? This would surely just-

"Hey, what the hell is going on over here?"

Immediately, Mishima fled, pocketing the calling card into his pocket for later use and made his way to his classroom. Kamoshida, meanwhile, looked at the gathered crowd in confusion before he looked at the bulletin board and read the calling cards.

His expression was priceless.

"Who the fuck did this?!"

TakeYourTime

"God damn he's pissed." Ryuji said with a snicker as they walked up the stairs, satisfied with the results. With how furious Kamoshida was, there could be no doubt that he had taken the warning very seriously. "So, his Treasure should be easy for the taking, right?"

"Definitely." Morgana flicked his tail. "By the way, nice work on the calling card. I don't believe we couldn't have done it any better."

Makoto sighed. "I had to proofread it six times." she said, much to Ryuji's chagrin when Ann shot him a look. "Ryuji-kun was trying too hard to sound like an adult. We would have done the logo better, but we were running short on time as is."

"It's fine." Akira replied, his eyes dancing with mischief. "Let's meet after school. Time we robbed the king blind."

Ryuji laughed. "Amen to that!"

TakeYourTime

" **Those goddamn brats… Fine! Steal it if you can!"**

TakeYourTime

(play: Persona 5 OST – Life Will Change)

The Metaverse had become overwhelming violent and angry, visible through a pulsating red tinge that seemed to pulse throughout the castle. The Shadows were more than agitated. It seemed as if they

were like wild animals, making them harder to avoid. Even their surroundings had changed. The walls had become cracked, the lavish furniture seemingly torn apart and ripped to shreds and smashed to hell. A red tinge dyed the atmosphere, as if signifying how the world had become.

The thieves knew, with the utmost certainty, that they had royally pissed off Kamoshida.

Finding their way back to the Throne Room was easier said than done, even if the shortcuts they managed to establish on their way. They were often accosted by Shadows, forcing them to deal with the matter as quickly as they could. They had no time to waste on the Shadows, not when a much bigger target was waiting for them.

After a few setbacks, they finally arrived back at the Throne Room. To their confusion, however, the doors were wide open, as if awaiting their arrival. "What the…?" Makoto furrowed her brow as they cautiously stepped inside, weapons gripped tightly. "The doors are open, the throne is empty, and there's not a single person here."

"Think it could be a trap?" Ryuji asked, glancing around.

"Could be." she admitted. "Keep your guard up. For now, let's go steal the Treasure!"

They all nodded and rushed up the steps past the throne. They entered the treasury, and found it largely unchanged. There were still gold coins and other valuables, but the most eye catching of them all had to be the giant floating crown, sitting in the middle of the air and dazzling in the light.

"Is that it?" Akira asked as they approached. Looking closely, he saw that the gold metal used to surround and decorate the red cloth was decorated in gemstones. It looked quite expensive, worth a lot of money. He couldn't help but wonder what the look on Iwai's face would be if he tried to sell this to him.

"Has to be." Makoto agreed with him before a troubled look formed on her face. "But, it's a lot bigger than I was expecting it to be. How are we supposed to carry this out *and* protect ourselves?!"

Anne nodded. "Yeah! It's way too big!" She then looked to Morgana, hoping he had some answer. "Mona, how do we..." she trailed off when she found the not-cat creature staring at the Treasure with starry eyes, drool hanging from its mouth. "Uh, M-Mona? Are you feeling alright?"

"T-Treasure..." Morgana slurred. He sounded as if he was drunk or high before his body sprung forward, latching onto the Treasure and began to rub himself against it, cheek nuzzling against a gemstone. "Meeeeeooooooow~"

Ryuji blinked. "...okay, who fed him catnip?" he asked. "No, seriously."

"For someone who says he's not a cat, he sure does act like one." Akira commented before he walked over and grabbed Morgana by the scruff of his neck, pulling him off the crown. That seemed to snap the cat out of it as he blinked rapidly, as if just now noticing where they were. "Back with us?"

For his part, Morgana seemed slightly ashamed of himself as Akira set him down. "I apologize for that… I have no idea what came over me!" he said.

"Well, it was certainly weird." Makoto hummed. "But moving that aside, Morgana. How do we get this outside? It's quite large, and we're likely to attract some attention while we're moving it."

"Not to worry about that." Morgana said before he hopped up and put his paw against the enormous crown. The crown seemed to shudder and quiver before it's form suddenly shrunk down. In seconds, it looked like a regular sized crown that bounced against the floor. "The wonders of cognition."

"Fancy." Ann said as she scooped up the crown. "In that case, let's get out of here quick!"

TakeYourTime

Unfortunately, the group didn't make it out very far. They had just stepped out into the Throne Room and were promptly met by

opposition. The only exit leading out of the Throne Room was now barred by several golden knights. And at the head was Kamoshida's Shadow, his golden eyes far more fiercer and full of rage than they had ever been previously. His otherwise handsome mug was marred by a spite-filled scowl. And at his side was the cognitive version of Ann Takamaki, still scantily clad.

" **You thieves must have a lot of nerve, daring to break into my throne and stealing my Treasure."** Kamoshida said, each word laced with venom. **"Where do you shitty brats get off, taking what is rightfully mine?!"**

"Oh, like we give a shit!" Ryuji snarled as he cracked his fists. "Like we told you earlier, Kamoshida! We're taking the Treasure, and you're gonna own up for what you did!"

" **Ignorant brats, the lot of you."** the Shadow hissed. **"That crown is my right of rule! It's very existence means that I am king! Everyone at Shujin Academy knows what I bring to the table! If it weren't for me, it never would have gained the recognition and fame it has been these last two years!"**

Makoto bared her fangs, fingers curling and forming into a tight fist. "You think that excuses what you've done?!" she shot back angrily. "Do you know how many people who you've hurt? How many people who looked up to you, and had their dreams broken?! Do you even care about the consequences?!"

The "king" scoffed and waved off her words. **"They all knew what they were getting themselves into! It isn't my fault they can't take the hint. Besides, isn't it better to just lie down and accept that you're a loser for the rest of your life? They could never hope to accomplish what I have! I'm a Gold Olympic sportsman! One of Japan's very best."** He narrowed his eyes and leered at the group of thieves in front of him. **"What makes you think any of you ever had any hope of succeeding me?! I'm a cut above all the rest! I am KING!"**

"No, you're not." Akira cut in. His face was calm, but there was a fire in his eyes. "All you are is a washed up volleyball player who's clinging to the past."

The look of absolute fury on Kamoshida's face was enough to raise their spirits. Ann nodded strongly. "Got that right. In a way, it's almost pitiful. *Almost* ." She narrowed her eyes, her hand crawling up to her mask. Blue embers began to flake from her face. "You're not some god, or a king. You're just a sick, twisted demon with perverted desires! And we will take all there is to you!"

"Damn straight!" Ryuji grinned wickedly. "We're gonna *Take Your Heart* !"

" **Y-you..."** Kamoshida's face contorted. Veins started to bulge beneath his skin. His yellow eyes began to bulge, glowing like fire. The cognitive Ann Takamaki backed away, intimidated by the sudden dark aura that began to flow out from his body. The sight alarmed the thieves and readied themselves, grasping their weapons tightly. **"You goddamn, shitty thieving brats! Do you understand who I am?! I am Suguru Kamoshida! I am King of this castle! I am King of Shujin Academy! I-I am… I am…!"**

He threw his head back and screamed from the top of his throat, the dark aura expanding and swallowing the entire front entrance.

" ***I AM KING! ! !*** "

Ferocious winds pushed the thieves back, forcing them to shield their faces. "Mona, the hell's going on?!" Ryuji demanded.

"I don't know…!" Morgana gritted his teeth, trying his best to keep his feet on the ground. "But this isn't normal! The distortion around Kamoshida's suddenly spiked!"

The front entrance to the Throne Room was covered in black, writhing mass. It looked hazy, but as the winds died down, it began to take on a physical form. The first thing that formed from the clump of darkness was a head, utterly demonic with jagged fangs for lips and an elongated, saliva soaked tongue with horns sprouting from its forehead. A crown sat atop its head. Compared to the head, however, the rest of its body was nowhere as large. Pink flesh and a rotund belly and tiny legs, but sporting two sets of arms. One set wielded golden utensils like a fork and knife, and the other set held a wine glass with the cognitive Ann Takamaki inside. In its free hand

was a riding crop.

"What the *fuck* is that?" Ryuji gasped. "Is-is that Kamoshida?!"

Morgana nodded gravely. "Yes… His distortion's reached the point where even his own Shadow has been affected. Worse, he's fused with the other Shadows. Be careful! This won't be like all the others!"

Bulging, red-shot eyes quivered, searching the room before they finally landed on the group. A warped screech ripped from Suguru Kamoshida's Shadow, Asmodeus, before it suddenly lunged at them, fork and knife raised. "Scatter!" Akira shouted. Immediately, everyone moved out of the way and dodged the pounce. The Shadow hit the ground with such force that the entire area shuddered. They swiftly recovered and rounded on the Shadow, weapons in hand. "Something tells me he won't let us go easily."

"Seems like." Morgana nodded. "Alright, rookie! Eyes up!"

(cue: Blooming Villain)

Asmodeus let out another ear-piercing roar as it swung its arms, the knife ripping across stone in an attempt to cut down Makoto. The brunette rolled out of the way and broke into a sprint before she leaped off the railing. Her mask dissolved into flame and Johanna appeared beneath her. She then hit the ground and sped away as the Shadow attempted to skewer her with its next attempt, aiming its fork at her. Once she was out of its range, she swerved and came to a full 180 stop, then proceeded to rev up the engine before speeding straight for Kamoshida's Shadow. A blue light began to swell in the tires.

"Heads up!" Ryuji shouted, proceeding to deliver covering fire as his Persona emerged into the air. In an attempt to deliver covering fire, it released several rounds of thunder bolts down upon Asmodeus, all aimed at its exposed back. It didn't seem to do much, however, as the Shadow merely shrugged off the attack before rearing its head back, eyes set on the blonde.

A fatal mistake for its part, as Makoto slammed Johanna straight into its neck. The energy in the wheels released and exploded straight

into the exposed Adam's Apple. Asmodeus chocked and fell onto its back, flailing wildly before it flipped onto its stomach. Shaking it off, it soon set its sights on Makoto and bounced up, proceeding to latch itself to the ceiling and then pounce on her. Eyes widening, Makoto skidded and fell into a slide, narrowly avoiding the attack.

Akira moved in quickly, one hand on his mask and the other holding his pistol. With a quick pull of the trigger, bullets were flying and Arsene with them. He aimed straight for the Shadow's eyeballs, hoping to inflict some impaired vision onto it. Malicious aura seeped around its claws as it moved in for the kill, only to find the way barred by a mere kitchen knife. The bullets that Akira shot merely just sank into the Shadow's body, as if being swallowed up. Clicking his tongue, Akira ordered Arsene to continue. Claws clashed against the golden utensil before Asmodeus thrusted the fork. With a flap of wings, Arsene evaded and kicked the fork away before going in again. It just managed to reach Asmodeus' side when it was swatted out of the air, courtesy of the riding crop and sent smashing right into the floor.

Akira gritted his teeth, feeling his body tremble in pain. He stumbled, but he persevered and glared. "Time for a change, then. Orpheus!" Arsene vanished in a flourish of flames, and in the gentleman thief's place stood the master of strings. Asmodeus seemed unconcerned with the change and instead flicked its tongue forward, as if aiming to grab the Persona and swallow it whole. Orpheus knocked the tongue away with its lyre, then strummed the strings and released a series of fireballs, all exploding into the Shadow's stomach.

Seizing the opportunity, Captain Kidd rammed its ship into Asmodeus' head, stunning it and then taking aim once more. This time, it charged up the shot and then released it, creating a giant bolt of thunder that struck the Shadow in the shoulder. The arm holding the knife suddenly went limp and the Shadow released a god-awful scream. "Alright, one down!" Ryuji cheered. Then his face paled as the Shadow suddenly bounced back up into the ceiling, then jumped straight at him. "Aw, shi-!"

Makoto snatched him as she drove past and pull ed him close to Johanna. Asmodeus smashed into the upper level, squirming in the pile of rubble before it pulled itself out, shaking off the debris. It

looked over it shoulder and found itself being pushed further into the wall by another barrage of flames, courtesy of Ann. "Burn up!" she growled as Carmen summond forth another volley.

Morgana aided her as Zorro appeared next to him. Wind danced around its blade as it cut its way forward, managing to slice off the limb carrying the riding crop. In response for its troubles, Zorro was pierced in the abdomen and forced into the ground. "Argh!" Morgana cried, clutching his chest as he fell to his knees. Zorro squirmed, trying to pry itself free. However, Asmodeus kept it pinned and loomed over it, licking its jaws. "It...hurts…!"

"Mona!"

Asmodeus opened its maw, aiming to bite off the Persona's head. Carmen, however, wouldn't allow it as it whipped one of its peons forward, wrapping the bindings around the Shadow's neck. It pulled and Asmodeus was yanked away, grip loosened on its fork. Makoto yelled a battle cry as she pushed Johanna to the metal, riding right off the railing and slamming her Persona right into the Shadow's face. Her Persona was dismissed and she was sent flying through the air while Asmodeus clutched its face, yelling out in pain and being forced down. With a groan, Zorro pulled the fork out and was recalled back into Morgana, who was pulled away by Ann. Captain Kidd rushed and grabbed Makoto while she was in mid-air, pulling her close to its side before setting it down on the ground.

"Are you okay, Morgana?" Ann asked. The not-cat creature nodded, albeit with a pained expression.

Ryuji grimaced. "He's just flailing around!" he said, watching Asmodeus pull itself up, growling and snarling as it grabbed its limp arm and pushed it inward, snapping it back into place. It cried out in pain, but then leveled a hate-filled glare at the thieves that dared to try and steal its Treasure. "We gotta find a way to ground him!"

To prove his point, Asmodeus bounced away, moving as far as possible from them. It latched on to the front entrance, as if guarding it before it raised its wine glass, drinking its contents and swallowing the cognitive Ann Takamki whole. Red liquid dribbled down the corner of its maw before it gulped down the contents, releasing a

content sigh. The stump that once held its riding crop shuddered, then expanded into a fresh, new limb.

Akira felt a shudder of revulsion. That...was just disgusting and horrifying to see, in all sense of the word. And the worst part was that it was merely a cognitive existence of Ann Takamki. He glanced at the real Ann, shuddering to imagine what could possibly happen if he were to do that to the real thing. Unwilling to let that happen, Orpheus showed its user's resolve and attempted to knock Asmodeus down, sending out another volley of flames its way. Asmodeus let out a defiant roar, and dodged the incoming assault, leaping to the upper level of the throne room.

Ryuji summoned Captain Kidd, attempting to stage another assault and charged forward. Orpheus moved in alongside him, harp raised and ready for combat. Asmodeus, in turn, reacted with violence and lashed out, grabbing Orpheus and threw it aside before swinging at Captain Kidd. The Persona narrowedly avoided the attack, but couldn't see the incoming fist heading it sway. As a result, it was knocked right out of the way. Ryuji yelped as his feet were lifted from the ground, and his back smacked up against the wall.

"Son of a…!" he hissed as he slumped to his feet, his Persona dispersing back into his mask.

Makoto narrowed her eyes and aimed her gun, attempting to shoot at one of its eyes like Akira had done before. She managed to get two shots off, but one missed. The other merely hit below the eye, making her scowl as the Shadow's attention was directed to her. Quickly, she hopped on Johanna and charged away as Asmodeus gave chase.

Recovering somewhat, Morgana stumbled up to his feet. "Hold on, Queen..." he muttered as Ann let him go. Zorro appeared beside him, eyes narrowed and fueled with anger, desperately looking for some payback. And the not-cat creature was more than happy to oblige. The burly Persona wished its sword about and launched scythes of wind forward, each lashing out at different angles. They curved through the air before they struck their target. One scythe of wind slashed into its back, creating a gash that spewed black fluids and another struck its tiny leg.

Asmodeus skidded to a stop, using its instruments to halt its retreat before it released a terrifying howl. It bounced up and latched itself into the ceiling, glaring daggers at the thieves, tongue wishing about before fell back to the ground, where it proceeded to rise to its legs and toss aside its instruments, hands all gathered around its chest. Energy suddenly began to swell in its grasp.

"Watch out!" Makoto shouted. "Something's coming!"

Everyone immediately recalled their Personas and took cover. With a roar, Asmodeus launched back into the air and slammed the ball of energy into the ground, mimicking Kamoshida's famous spike in the real world. As soon as it struck, the ground broke apart and shockwaves tore away at the stone. The aftershock that followed as enough to cause the entire castle to tremble. The pillars Ryuji and Ann hid behind cracked, looking ready to fall apart any minute. Morgana clinged to the railing for dear life, lest he be thrown aside. Makoto clung to the ground at her feet, fingers digging in as best she could.

Akira was not so fortunate, as he was sent sailing through the air. His body twirled around, eyes searching for anything to help him stop, and immediately found his way towards a nearby chandelier. With impressive dexterity that would make even an acrobat jealous, he twisted his body at an angle and grabbed hold of the chain, swinging himself on top of the chandelier. Panting, he looked down at the throne room.

It was utterly wrecked. Debris and smoke were beginning to fill into the area. The upper level had been demolished, leaving behind only a few walkways. The ground looked as if it had been gouged out with a giant knife. And the stairs leading up to the treasury were utterly demolished. Even the walls that separated both rooms were destroyed, allowing gold to spill into the room. The twisted parody of the sky and outside world could be seen as well.

"Talk about a redecoration." Akira said as he looked back at Asmodeus, who was howling and roaring as if wanting someone to challenge its rule. "One more hit like that, and we're done for. Skull was right, we have to ground him."

And he had a good idea how. All he needed was bait. And luckily, he already had it.

"Hey, Kamoshida!" he shouted. Asmodeus ceased its roars and whipped its head, finding him atop the chandelier. With a cheeky grin, he held up the Treasure. The Shadow's eyes widened and locked on to the object, completely ignoring everything else. "You want this? Then come and get it!"

"Joker!" Morgana cried in dismay. "What are you doing?!"

Asmodeus acted faster than anyone else, lunging straight at Akira. He waited until the Shadow was right in front of him before he whipped out his knife and, with one swift cut, severed one of the chains. His mask erupted into flame and Orpheus appeared behind him, harp held firmly in hand. Asmodeus reached out to grab him and snatch the Treasure, but Orpheus struck first, slamming its harp into the chandelier at full force. The result was the chandelier being slammed right into the Shadow, ramming into its solar plexus. The strain behind the strike also knocked some of the bolts on the remaining chains lose. With a wide swing, the chandelier threw Asmodeus into the ceiling, leaving it pinned there. Akira abandoned ship and jumped back down to the ground, landing flawlessly beside Makoto.

"What did you think?"

Makoto smiled at him. It didn't reach her eyes, however. "We are going to have a *long* talk after this, I hope you know." she said sweetly, in spite of the chill her words brought down his spine.

An Iron Maiden, indeed.

Asmodeus grunted, pushing the chandelier off of its body and fell back to the ground. The earth shuddered as a result. It fumbled as it tried to get back up on its feet, clearly dazed. The first to take advantage of this was Ryuji, who had Captain Kidd go charging at the Shadow at full speed, shooting thunder bolts. They seemed to do more damage than they had previously, perhaps a sign that the Shadow had weakened somehow before it slammed its ship into Asmodeus' face, tearing off a good chunk of its jaw in the process.

A shrill scream ripped from Asmodeus' throat, clutching its ruined mug. Black-and-red muck flowed down betwixt its clawed fingers before its eyes widened, finding Carmen sending a volley of flames its way. It quickly leaped out of the way, but one of the Persona's lackies whipped out and snatched it by the leg, pulling it right back into the line of fire. The explosions further rattled it, allowing Morgana a clean shot of another of its limbs. Zorro moved in, faster this time, and slashed its rapier. Two arms fell, one holding the wine glass and the other one of its free arms.

Asmodeus attempted to counter by pummeling the burly Persona, but its fist was demolished, courtesy of Johanna grinding its tire into its hand, laced with Frei all the while. Orpheus was the last to strike, delivering a brutal beatdown with its harp. Each blow was harder than the last, and the beating proceeded to get faster and faster until the movements became a blur. The flurry of blows reached a crescendo when Orpheus pulled its harp back as far as it could, then swung.

Suguru Kamoshida's Shadow was sent flying through the air, and slammed harshly back into the ground. Weakly, and groaning in pain, it stumbled and attempted to rise back up to its feet.

"It's weakened!" Morgana cheered. "Let's wrap this up, guys!"

Makoto nodded, eyes blazing. "Gun it, Johanna!" She revved up her Persona. The engine roared as power coiled around the wheels before she took off like a bullet, tearing up the ground like a bulldozer. Asmodeus saw her approaching, and feebly, grabbed the golden knife at its side, attempting to take her down with a thrust. Makoto skidded to a stop and pulled, Johanna grinding on top of its front wheel while the rest of it took to the air. The back wheel struck against the gold utensil and obliterated it, the Frei shattering it to pieces. The shockwave that followed caused Asmodeus to fall to its rear.

Ryuji quickly ran up, intending to finally make Kamoshida pay for all that he did. Makoto grinned and held up her hand. The blonde delinquent returned it in kind with a high five, then jumped. His body went up higher than he thought possible, even with the limp in his leg. He raised his club and slammed it right down on top of

Asmodeus' noggin'. Pink flesh rippled before it split, but Ryuji wasn't done. "Captain!" The ship-riding Persona darted out from Ryuji's back while the latter jumped away, having stunned the Shadow. With what little energy it had left, Captain Kidd unleashed a barrage of lightning upon the Shadow. Some struck it, others missed. But the amount of bolts was something to behold.

Ryuji smacked his hand against Ann's, who's mask had already burned away into flames. "Dance, Carmen!" she said, eyes vengeful. Carmen gave a razor-thin smile before it sent out both of its lovers, wrapping their bondage around Asmodeus' neck before proceeding to toss it around like a rag doll, slamming it against the ceiling and walls before it tossed it up into the air, leaving it vulnerable to a giant ball of flame that exploded right in its face. Asmodeus flew through the air before it smashed against the metal doors that led to its treasure. The walls caved in around it, burying it underneath the rubble.

"Let's finish this!" Morgana said as he exchanged a high five with Ann also. His eyes glittered in joy, having done such an act with the woman of his fancy before Zorro emerged in a beautiful flourish of azure flame. Asmodeus demonstrated what little strength it had left by pushing itself out from underneath the rubble and tore its way straight at him, its eyes deranged. It was getting desperate. It couldn't let this continue. Not when its life was at stake. But Morgana's lit passion beat its desperate attempts as Zorro delivered an uppercut that would make a boxer green with envy, stunning the Shadow before it promptly had its last two arms cut off, then knocked back to the steps, leading just up to the throne where Kamoshida's Shadow once sat.

Akira approached, tugging at his gloves. Orpheus had receded back into his mind, slipping away while his other self released a pulse. A low chuckle rumbled through his mind, bringing a smile to his face. "You wanna finish this up, Joker?"

Morgana didn't even need to ask as the former exchanged the baton.

Asmodeus had one last trick up its sleeve, however. Despite all the damage it had received, it was not out of the game just yet. With a

manic roar, its long tongue lashed out, aiming right for Akira. It almost touched him when a sharp stiletto heel, nothing more than a mere dagger, stabbed into the tongue and pinned it to the ground. Arsene gave the Shadow a menacing, flaming grin that promised it nothing but pain. It was then that Asmodeus began to shake, for Akira stepped past his Persona, sharing its expression. Worse, somehow, the frizzy-haired teen's eyes had become crimson red. Malevolent and vicious

Eyes like those of a demon.

"I've taken it." he announced with a wicked, toothy grin as Arsene grabbed hold of the tongue, grasping it tightly before it yanked the Shadow forward. It reared its claw back, vicious black energy swarming around its claws and begging to be released. To tear and rip the Shadow apart until there was nothing left. "The arrogance in your heart!"

Arsene thrusted its arm forward, and the power was released. Claws of jet black tore flesh asunder, and Asmodeus screamed as its body was torn straight into two pieces, losing shape and reduced to mere black puddy that splashed against the floor. Little more than stains on the ground. Inside that muck was Kamoshida's Shadow, lying in it while the black-and-red sludge slid off of its body.

Arsene let out a demonic laugh, having achieved victory over the Palace ruler of lust and receded back into Akira's mask. He took a deep breath, then exhaled as he ran his gloved hand through his locks of hair. This had been nothing short of tiresome, yet somehow, he felt excited. Kamoshida was down for the count, or so it looked. Even if this was not the real Kamoshida, this was still the one who ruined any and all chances of him getting a second shot at a normal life. And he'd probably never get it back.

The tension slowly left his body, and he eased up, turning back to his comrades. All of whom were smiling, reveling in their victory.

"Nicely done." Morgana said with a smirk. "You're proving your chops. I knew there was a reason I chose you, rookie."

"You still got the Treasure?" Ryuji asked. Akira nodded and pulled

the downsized crown out of his pocket. With this, they had succeeded in their objective. Now, all they had to do was leave the Palace, and Kamoshida would repent for his actions. And with any luck, the bastard would spend the rest of his life behind bars. "Alright, then let's book it."

" **Give..."**

The group stopped cold and turned around. Kamoshida's Shadow pitifully stood up, its face showing exhaustion and fear. There was no longer a trace of the proud and accomplished gold medalist. All that was left was a terrified man, who feebly reached out to reclaim his crown.

" **Give that back..."** Kamoshida's Shadow begged pitifully. **"That's mine. I need that!"**

Makoto scowled. "After all this, you still think have any right to make demands?" she spat angrily. "We're taking this Treasure back with us to the real world. And you will repent for your crimes, Kamoshida."

" **But you can't! Without that, those hyenas will eat me alive!"** the Shadow cried fearfully. **"If I can't continue bringing Shujin fame, I'm nothing! I'll be kicked to the curb! I'll have nothing!"**

It was pathetic. Akira couldn't help but see all of this as pathetic. And perhaps a little sad. Kamoshida was just making excuses, but the fear was real. All he really had to his name was a gold medal and the fame that came with it. And all he could do to preserve it was this job here at Shujin Academy. Without either of those, he'd just quickly become forgotten by society. A nameless athlete. And that was going to be his fate, along with what little fame he had being dragged through the mud once his crimes came to light.

Akira was about to turn away and leave, but Ann seemed to have other ideas. The fire hadn't left her eyes at all. In fact, they only seemed to grow. Her whole body was shaking, but it wasn't because they had just escaped a brutal battle. It was out of anger.

"Panther…?"

"You think you have any right to beg, after all this?" Ann asked, her voice quiet yet full of anger. She stepped away from the Phantom Thieves and towards Kamoshida. "After everything you've done? To me? To everyone at our school? To *Shiho* ?"

Her Persona emerged. Makoto's eyes widened fearfully. "Ann!"

Carmen grabbed Kamoshida by the throat, the bindings attached to one of her lovers digging into his neck before the King suddenly found himself danging over the edge, created in the midst of his rampage. Below him waited the castle grounds, yet from this height, he would surely die.

"Ann!" Ryuji cried out. "Don't do it!"

" **N-No! No!"** Kamosida's Shadow whimpered, tears running down its face as it struggled. **"I-I-I don't wanna die! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I don't want to die! Don't kill me! Please!"**

"Why shouldn't I?" Ann shot back. "You nearly killed Shiho just a few days ago. She's still in ICU. The doctors don't even know if she'll even wake up." A tear rolled down her face. Carmen narrowed its eyes and held up a hand, flames burning in its grasp. "And this is what she looked at. This same view, right before she tried to kill herself. And she almost succeeded, too."

The moment seemed to go on forever. The air was tense. Akira wasn't sure if he was still breathing or not. They were all frozen in place, fearful of what Ann was about to do. Akira was about to move in, to try and stop her, but to his relief, Ann didn't go through with it. The flames in Carmen's hand spluttered out of existence and pulled Kamoshida back, throwing him back to the floor. The Shadow whimpered, finding itself on its hands and knees as it looked up, finding a vengeful Ann looming over him as if she were the Yama.

"But she's still alive. Even if she doesn't want to be alive, she is. And killing you isn't going to make me feel better." she growled. She glared at him, hoping that maybe he'd just spontaneously combust. But he was still alive. Alive and willing to pay. "You don't get to die. Not until you've atoned for everything you've done. Do we have an understand, you son of a bitch?!"

Numbly, Kamoshida's Shadow nodded. **"Y...yes, I understand."** he said before a remorseful smile formed across its face. To the party's surprise, motes of light began to surround the Shadow as its body began to break away. **"I will make sure that I..."**

It's sentence was left unfinished as it soon vanished away, form dispersing into the last particles of light that soon faded away from existence.

"What..." Makoto said, surprised. "What was that?"

"The Shadow's returned to their original self." Morgana informed them. "It's forfeited any and all control over the Palace now." The ground beneath their feet began to shake. "And that means it's our cue to leave! We've the Treasure, now move!"

The Phantom Thieves nodded. They darted out of the Throne Room, leaving it behind. All around them, the castle began to break apart and fall into ruin. It all came crumbling down, for it no longer served a purpose. It's king had abdicated its throne and removed all desires. It's purpose was no longer required.

And so it fell, fading away and being devoured by the expanse that was known as the Metaverse.

TakeYourTime

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Akira panted, his back falling against the wall behind him. His legs gave out and he fell to the ground. Ann leaned against the wall for support as she attempted to catch her breath. Makoto was much the same, except she was slightly more in shape and only doubled over with her hands on her knees. Ryuji was by far the most exhausted, with his leg in agonizing pain and laid flat over the ground.

"Too...much...fucking...running..." he gasped for breath, taking in large gulps of air. "God, I haven't felt this exhausted since the Track Meet last year!"

"We're back in reality, so that's a plus..." Makoto said with a shaky smile. As she regained her strength, she stood back up, albeit

shaking all over. "H-hahaha… I'm still trembling."

"Same here." Ann said with a small smile of her own. "I think I'm still high on adrenaline."

"How 'bout you, Akira?" Ryuji called from the floor. "You doin' okay?"

He could only offer a nod. Morgana looked at the group, sitting atop a trash can with a slight grin. "Well done, all of you." he said with earnest praise and appreciation. "Congratulations on your first successful heists as the phantom thieves."

"Speaking of which, what about the Treasure?" Makoto asked. If they had lost it amid the chaos, then all of their efforts would likely have been for nothing. Akira dug in his pocket, then paused. "Hm? What's wrong, Akira-kun?"

The frizzy-haired teen was puzzled. The shape felt different. It was thinner, more round now. Flat. And there was something connected to it. He grabbed hold of the cloth that connected to the Treasure, then pulled it out from his pocket. To the group's shock, it was not a crown Akira had pulled out from his pocket, but rather a medal. An Olympic gold medal, to be precise.

"A medal?" Ryuji asked, slack-jawed. "But-but what about the crown?!"

"That's the true Treasure." Morgana told them. "In the Metaverse, the object that began their twisted desires will take on an entirely different form. For Kamoshida, his desire to cling to his past fame became the symbol of his rule here at Shujin. That medal, to him, was his crown."

Makoto hummed. "I see..." she said, nodding in understanding. "So, the medal was what caused his desires to distort in the first place. But is this the same one he has in his possession?"

"Nope. It's a fake, but it's the closest you'll ever get to the genuine article." the not-cat creature told them.

Akira pocketed the medal away and stood back up. His legs were a bit shaky, and he was still short of breath, but he was calming down.

Adjusting his glasses, he looked at the school with some wariness. Nobody had seemed to notice them suddenly appearing in the middle of an alley, though they were beginning to receive a few odd stares and hushed whispers.

"Hey, what about Kamoshida?" Ryuji asked urgently, still remembering that his and Akira's futures were at stake. "His heart's been changed, yeah?"

"It should have."

" *Should* ?! Y-you damn cat! Our lives our at stake here!"

"Calm down, Ryuji!" Makoto snapped at him, hushing the blonde delinquent. "I don't think the change of heart will be instant. If anything, it'll take time for it to occur." He clearly didn't like the response and opened his mouth to complain, but she shushed him then and there. "I know you don't like it, but we have to wait and see how things go from here. If Kamoshida hasn't undergone a full change of heart by the time the deadline hits, I'll see if I can try and smooth things over with Kobayakawa."

Ann frowned. "You sure that'll work?"

"Of course it would. Admittedly, though, I'll have to bring up sis' name in conversation, but it should be enough of an incentive for the Principal to do something." Makoto said. The man had made it no secret that he was proud to have the Niijima family attending his academy, especially considering how successful Sae and their father had been. It was blind favoritism, but it would be enough to work in their favor. "By the way, Ann, about what happened earlier..."

The girl winced and sighed heavily. "I know. I'm sorry. It's just..." she sucked in a breath and shook her head. "Hearing him spout all that bullshit. It really made me angry. I kept thinking back to what happened with Shiho, and I just..."

"It's fine. Admittedly, I think anyone would react similarly in that sort of situation." the brunette told her, holding her shoulder in reassurance. "I'm just glad you didn't stoop to his level."

"...yeah."

"In any case, let's head home for the day. If we stay here any longer, we're bound to attract some more unwanted attention."

Akira nodded. Morgana meowed and hopped back into his back, and the group set off for home. They could not deny the excitement and joy that rumbled in their hearts over their victory against Kamoshida. The person that had been a threat in their lives at this school was finally gone. Or so they hoped, at the very least. They could only hope that the change of heart took effect soon. It would be worrying if all they did turned out to be for nothing. However, admittedly, Akira felt that if Kamoshida had changed and he still would have been expelled from Shujin, he would have been happy, since it meant his friends would be okay.

Friends. Now that he thought about it, he never realized it until now. Makoto, Ryuji, Morgana and Ann. All of them were the first real friends he had made in Tokyo. The people who accepted him and his baggage.

And for the first time in a very, *very* long while, the Trickster smiled a true smile.

TO BE CONTINUED…?

Confidants

Ann Takamaki - the LOVERS: [A girl with a quarter of American blood, giving her an exotic look compared to other students. Awakened to the power of Persona in order to make Kamoshida pay for his role in Shiho's attempted suicide. One of the few people to accept Akira when he arrived at Shujin.]

A/N : Whew, my long string of updates are finished! I finally got around to them, partially thanks to my internet taking a shit.

Huh. Never thought I'd thank my shitty wifi for that. The things you

start to learn in life.

Anyway, with this, the Kamoshida Arc is now finished. For those who have chosen to stick around for this long, from the bottom of my heart, I thank all of you. Special thanks go to everyone who has helped bring this story to where it is now!

However, that being said, I should also tell you guys that this story, along with all of my other ones, will be on hiatus. Here's the reason why:

One of the first stories I published on this site was a code geass story, and the one that more or less kicked me off into where I am now here on this community. "Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion R-eset." It has been near completion for quite a while, but I've been either burned out on completing it, procrastinating or just couldn't find the will to write.

But, around the time I left for Seattle to go visit a friend, I checked a poll I had up for a while, asking you guys if you enjoyed my content. A lot of you said you did, and there were more than a few people who said "meh." But not a single one of you guys told me you hated what I wrote.

Hence, it's only fair I repay such kindness by finishing R-eset.

So, for now, our merry band of phantom thieves' journey will end on a cliffhanger. But rest assured, dear guests…

...the game is not yet over.

See You~

21st Heist: Afterwards

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Now, one such group of Tricksters has emerged, in order to rise up against this ruin.

They are known simply as…

" ***The Phantom Thieves of Hearts."***

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

21st Heist: Afterwards

School had changed, if only slightly. People were still giving Akira the occasional stink-eye, but their attention was diverted to the events of what happened the other day. The calling card they had left behind was the talk of the whole school, with everyone

animatedly talking about it. Even the teachers seemed troubled by it, especially Kobayakawa. Since he was keeping quiet about the abuse, chances are, the fact that somebody was calling Kamoshida out and threatening to expose him was enough to terrify the poor guy. In the afternoon when he saw the fat man, Kobayakawa was sweating up a storm.

However, Akira had noticed another change. Something Ryuji also noticed as the two met up in the hallway. "You see Kamoshida at all today?" Akira shook his head. The former runner scrunched his brow in confusion. "PE got cut today too. Something about the teacher feeling off or something. And last I checked, the only PE teacher we got is Kamoshida."

"It must mean the change of heart is settling in." Morgana chimed from the bag, but was careful not to let anyone catch him. "Either that, the man is sick."

"Hopefully its the former." Ryuji grimaced. "Our necks are on the line here. By the way, you hungry? The shop down by the front entrance should still have some yakisoba bread. It's pretty damn good."

Akira shrugged. He wasn't much of a big fan on junk food, but he wasn't going to say no. Besides, he was feeling a little famished. The two left the hallway, but stopped when Ryuji nearly found himself colliding with a wall of green. "Whoa! What the?!"

"Oh, I'm sorry!" a girl behind said green wall, nothing but bags of fertilizer from the look of it, apologized as she poked her head out. It was the same girl Akira and Ryuji had run into the other day, recognizable by the puffy hair alone. "I can hardly see with all this, so…!"

"I'm more amazed she can lift all that..." the not-cat whispered in awe. "And she looks so scrawny!"

Akira had to agree. That was impressive. However, it was also dangerous if she couldn't see past the bags. "Do you need help with that?" he asked.

The girl blinked in surprise, but then nodded gratefully. "Y-yes! That

would be wonderful, thank you!" Ryuji grumbled to himself, but he helped Akira and took his fair share of the load as well. The girl then directed them to the rooftop, much to their confusion.

It was certainly difficult, and it certainly showed the girl's impressive strength if they struggled. A shame they weren't in the Metaverse, otherwise they would have been able to lift these no problem.

When they arrived at the rooftop, Akira and Ryuji set the fertilizer bags down near the door. "I'm sorry to ask you to do this." the girl apologized. "I would have done this sooner, but I've been rather busy as of late."

"It's fine." Akira told her. "If you don't mind me asking, what's all the fertilizer for?"

"For my garden, of course." The girl gestured to the side. They hadn't noticed it when they came in, but there were several desks that had numerous potted plants, easily numbering over two dozen. "I'm part of the school's Agriculture Club, so I help maintain the garden."

"Agriculture Club?" Ryuji asked. "That's mostly third-years, though. Does that mean you're our senpai?"

The girl giggled. "I suppose it would. My name is Haru."

"Er, Ryuji. This is Akira." The frizzy-haired teen nodded and bowed his head respectfully towards his upperclassmen.

Haru smiled back at him. "It's nice to meet you both. And thanks again for all of your hard work."

"Eh, it was no problem." the blonde delinquent shrugged before he checked his phone. His eyes then widened in panic. "Aw, crap. Break's almost over! We got that warhawk Ushimaru today!" He quickly apologized to Akira, then bolted like a bat straight out of hell.

An impressive feat for someone who had a limp.

Thankfully for Akira, though, he had Kawakami today. That being said, he was certain the woman would be as tired as she usually

was. It made him wonder what kind of lifestyle the poor woman had if she looked dogged. He bowed his head again to Haru and made his way to the door.

"Um, Kurusu-kun?" Haru stopped him. He looked over his shoulder, finding Haru looking at him with some concern. "I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but...are the transfer student everyone keeps talking about?"

' *So, even the upperclassmen know, huh? Figures...'* Akira grimaced, but kept silent. Instead, all he did was offer a nod. He didn't see much reason to hide it, considering she likely wouldn't have believed him if he lied.

To his surprise, however, Haru looked quite apologetic. "I apologize for the other students, as well as my own classmates. For what it's worth, though, I think you're a very nice person." Akira stared at her wide-eyed. That was not what he had expected to hear. "Rumors are a terrible thing, aren't they?"

"...yeah. They are." was all he could muster to say.

Haru then smiled as she turned back to her garden, grabbing one of the bags of fertilizer. "Thank you again for your help, Kurusu-kun." she said sincerely. "I have to fertilize the flowers first before I head back. You can go on ahead."

Akira nodded. He bid her farewell and left the rooftop. Morgana poked his head out from the bag, smiling widely. "She was quite nice." he remarked. "Much better than the rest of the kids here. And *very* much nicer than Sae!"

He rolled his eyes, but he nonetheless agreed. Sae could be...cold at times, but he knew she meant well. Especially since she was working with double the work load, what with him more or less being shoved into her care in spite of the fact that she agreed to look after him. He still didn't know the full details behind that, but he wasn't about to pry.

As for the reason why Morgana mentioned Sae, it had not taken long for the woman to discover the cat's presence. When she did,

she was quite livid and was about to bite Akira's head off before Makoto stepped in and helped cool her sister off. The story was that Morgana was a stray cat that she and Akira had chosen to look after. Sae was still a bit peeved, but another look at Morgana was enough for her to be convinced, so long as the cat didn't do anything that would warrant it being kicked out.

That being said, first impressions were important. And if Makoto was Queen, then Sae Niijima was the Empress.

Still...Morgana had a point. Haru was the first person outside of everyone at Shujin that was nice to him. It was...strange. And perhaps a little nice. Comforting, if the "pulse" from Orpheus was of any indication.

TakeYourTime

After school ended, Akira had decided to follow up on part time jobs. It had been a few days since the Palace fell, and he was still in need of some cash. And he was not about to go asking Sae, out of fear she might kick him out. Thankfully for him, she directed him to a small little cafe in an alleyway in Yongen-jaya. Cafe Leblanc, run by an old man named Sojiro Sakura.

The man was a little distant, but he was professional. Not to mention he made a mean cup of coffee, if the words of his customers meant anything. The people who came by were mostly people in the alley, and a few passing business men. One of the more frequent customers was the blue-haired woman in the gothic clothes.

"Akira, was it?" Sojiro asked out of the blue as he was preparing another cup of coffee. "If you don't mind me asking, why'd you decide to take up a job here at this place? Last I checked, this place isn't exactly well-known. Not to mention there's hardly any reason why people go coming to Leblanc."

"And there he goes, selling this place short!" a customer with a thin beard and broad smile chuckled. "Honestly, I wish Boss would just start a chain of coffee shops. The coffee this man makes is insane, and you haven't lived until you've tried his curry!"

Akira smiled thinly. "I'll take your word for it." he said before turning back to Sojiro. "I guess it's mostly because I needed cash."

"What? Not getting any allowance?"

"I'd rather not have to rely on Niijima-san for stuff, and my parents...well, they're both occupied with their own thing." he said. His father had sent him a few letters and once tried to call him, but he was pretty busy this time of year so he rarely heard from him. As for his mother...well, she had made her decision, and he wouldn't fault her for it. "Besides, I like coffee."

Sojiro hummed, scratching his chin. "Well, good answer as any, I guess." he muttered. "But remember, I won't have you making half-ass cups of joe, y'hear?" He nodded. If there was anything he understood about Sojiro, it was that the man took his coffee making lessons very seriously.

"His coffee is the stuff of legend." the customer said, boosting with praise for the old man. "I still remember the first time I tried it. Ah, how I wish I could go back to those days. It's a shame you haven't had time to find a good wife, though, Boss. I bet you'd make that special lady one happy woman."

At this, Sojiro scoffed and waved a hand. "At my age? You're kidding."

"I remember you once telling me you were quite the ladies man, though! Plus, I hear these days, most women prefer older men."

"Most." Akira cut in. "Not all."

"What the kid said." Sojiro added. "And besides, the odds of me finding a good wife are pretty much next to nothing."

"I see." the customer said before he looked around. "Is that little girl still hiding away in her room?"

Sojiro grimaced. "Yeah..."

"The poor girl must have it rough. I've heard from the neighbors. If she's really that bad, Boss, you should try taking her to a doctor. Or

maybe send her to Doctor Takemi."

"Believe me, I've tried, but she just won't listen." the old man sighed. "I figured, maybe, she should do it at her own pace."

"Whatever you say, Boss." the customer shrugged before he turned to Akira, who had done his best not to pry into the conversation. "So, young man! Akira-kun, right? What's your impression of Boss?"

Akira looked up and pursed his lips. He only knew the man for maybe a handful of hours in the time he spent working here, so he didn't have a clear impression of him yet. "I don't know. I only met the guy a few days ago." he said. "But he does make good coffee."

Sojiro smiled at that. "And if I have it my way, you'll be making something decent." he said as he put a hand to his hip. "But enough chit-chat. I don't pay you to talk and listen. Come over here for a second, and show me what you've learned so far, kid."

TakeYourTime

When Akira returned to the Niijima household, he found Sae working at the table. A usual sight these days, though Makoto was nowhere to be found. "Welcome back." Sae greeted him amicably. "You weren't up to mischief, I hope?"

"No. Just working at Leblanc." he answered. Conversations between the two of them were usually short and clipped, if mostly out of tension and the awkwardness between them. He returned to his room and stepped inside, closing the door behind him. Morgana then slipped out from the bag, hopping on top of his desk. Sighing, Akira fell onto his bed. "What a day..."

"You two really can't hold a conversation, can you?" Morgana said, frowning slightly. "Well, not that I blame you or anything. She seems quite terrifying, especially when she's angry."

On that, they could agree. As Akira attempted to try and take a nap, his cell phone buzzed. He removed it from his pants pocket and saw that it was part of a group chat from Ryuji. He only took a second to decide before he opened it.

RS : You noticed how everyone's gotten really tense at school?

AK : How do you mean?

MN : I believe he's referring to the calling card. Kobayakawa had been trying to calm down Kamoshida down all day when he saw it.

MN : On the subject of Kamoshida, he's taken a temporary leave of suspension.

RS : Seriously?! Then that means he's going through that change of heart business?!

AK : Seems like.

AT : I've been hearing how someone's been threatening Kamoshida. They have to know about everything, right?

MN : They're likely amazed someone had the audacity to call him out.

RS : They'll be even more amazed when the bastard confesses.

RS : By the way, Ann. How's Shiho? Any changes?

AT : No. She's still out cold. But I'm hoping that she might be able to rest easier once Kamoshida confesses what he's done.

MN : Now that I think about it… It could just be my imagination, but hasn't Mishima-kun been shadowing us a lot lately?

AK : you think?

RS : Why would he be following us?

AT : Do you think he knows about what we did?!

RS : Unless he's got that Nav thing, I doubt it. Then again, maybe he just suspects us because we were asking about Kamoshida?

AK : Could be. We'll have to wait and see for now.

The chat ended and Akira set his phone down. As he was about to

head off to sleep, his phone went off again. This time, it was a message from Ryuji.

RS : Hey, man. You got a sec?

AK : What's wrong?

RS : Well, after this whole Kamoshida thing blows over...I was thinking maybe I can try and get back into running.

AK : Didn't the Track Team disband?

RS : I didn't mean getting back into it like that! It's just, haven't you noticed something different about yourself when you get your Persona?

AK : I have.

RS : For me, it's like...I feel lighter. Maybe a bit stronger. Not as strong as Haru-senpai, sure, but still strong. And my leg hurts less than it usually does. That's why I'm thinking of trying to get back into shape.

RS : I probably won't get my leg back in working order enough for me to run like how I did before, but…

RS : So, what do you say? Some training when this whole thing's over?

Akira read the message, then smiled. If that's all Ryuji was asking for him, then sure. Besides, he had to admit, training in the real world did sound like a good idea. Like Ryuji, he noticed how he felt much lighter on his feet. And he didn't feel as oppressed as he once did when he first came to Shujin Academy.

AK : Sure.

RS : Sweet! I'll be sure to remember the protein drinks and powder!

"Powder?" Morgana frowned. "Powder for what?"

TakeYourTime

Since Akira had some free time to himself after school, since Sojiro called him earlier to tell him that he didn't need to work on account of him going on a resupply run, he decided to check out the library. In hindsight, though, that wasn't probably the best idea, since the quiet environment made it all the more easier for him to hear the hushed whispers and glares. Somehow, the silence and chilly atmosphere of the library made them all the more uncomfortable, but it wasn't like Akira hadn't dealt with this sort of thing before.

The librarian in charge was also a little cold when she learned that he was the transfer student, even informing him that he could only rent one book at a time and must return it before the due date passed, despite the fact that not too seconds earlier did he see a female student borrow at least six different books while apologizing for returning a few previous books well past the due date.

He sighed to himself, but he nonetheless took the opportunity to peruse Shujin's selection. He eventually found one title that interested him.

"Arsene Lupin: Gentleman Thief." Akira read the title of the book, a pleased smile on his face. As he went over to check it out, he noticed a girl staring at him curiously. There wasn't any malice behind it, nor was she whispering any harsh things. He raised an eyebrow, but otherwise shrugged his shoulders.

As he expected, the librarian was giving him the stink eye as he checked the book out and also reminded him that he would have to pay for the book if it was not returned on the due date.

Akira left the library behind him, slipping the book into his bag. He was about to leave for home when someone called out to him from behind. "Kurusu-cchi? Could I borrow you for a second?"

The frizzy-haired teen blinked. *Kurusu-cchi* ? That was a new one. He hadn't been called that once in his life. He turned around and found the girl who was staring at him earlier. She was obviously a third-year, hair somewhat unkempt and falling down to her shoulders with thin-rimmed glasses sitting on her nose. There was a hint of intellect in those almond-colored eyes of hers.

"Can I help you?" Akira asked politely.

The woman nodded. "Yes. I'm sorry for calling you out like this. I'm Aikawa, from the Journalism Club." she introduced herself. "Our club's a little on the small side, but we've been doing her best to earn our keep. Right now, we're doing a survey here at Shujin for our second-years. Would you mind answering a few questions?"

She seemed to mean well, but Akira couldn't help but feel a little suspicious. She didn't seem to have any ulterior motives. Her face was utterly neutral, and spoke in a clipped tone akin to a reporter. He weighed his options carefully, then nodded. "Alright."

"Thank you." Aikawa said gratefully as she took out a recorder. "First of all, what do you think about Shujin Academy? I understand that you transferred here from Sumaru City, isn't that right?"

"That's right. It seems pleasant so far."

"If you don't mind me asking, what was the school you previously attended?"

"Seven Sisters."

Aikawa's eyes widened slightly. "Isn't that one of the best schools in Japan?"

"It is." Akira nodded. "I finished my first-year and was going to start my second-year there until I had to move here to Tokyo."

"Because of your probation, correct? No, nevermind. Let's resume our topic. How would you compare Shujin to Seven Sisters?"

Well, for starters, no one at Seven Sisters treated me like I was some kind of walking contagion. Akira thought sarcastically, wanting to roll his eyes. He kept his answer neutral. "I can't really say. I guess in terms of academics, it's maybe on the same level as Seven Sisters."

"I see." Aikawa nodded. "I'm sure Kobayakawa-sensei will be thrilled to hear that. But moving on, let's discuss the future. What do you intend to do once you graduate, assuming you stay in Tokyo to

complete your third year here?"

That was unlikely. Once the year passed, Akira would return to Tokyo and most likely resume his schooling there, though he doubted Seven Sisters would accept him back. He would likely be enrolled at another school. That said, the thought that he wouldn't see his new friends again for a while made him a little depressed, especially since they were the few that actually believed in him.

"I haven't given it much thought." Akira answered honestly. "My plans for right now are just to make it through my probation with no problems."

"I see. Thank you for your honesty, Kurusu-cchi." Aikawa said before she shut her recorder off. "This will be good data for the survey." Akira shrugged. He was glad he could help, but he doubted that she would use his answers. Likely, she just wanted to be thorough, and he hadn't exactly been very helpful. Before he could leave though, Aikawa stopped him again. "Would you mind if I asked you a more personal question?"

He grimaced. *I should have known…*

He turned back around and kept a neutral face. "What do you want to ask?"

"It won't take long, I promise." Aikawa assured him. "Do you remember the name of the person who sued you?"

Wait, what? Akira blinked. He hadn't been expecting that question at all. "I-I'm sorry?"

"You probably don't understand it yet, but you being here is quite a novelty story in of itself, Kurusu-cchi." Aikawa stated with brutal honesty. "Kobayakawa-san accepted you so Shujin would gather more prestige. "Famous High School Successfully Rehabilitates Dangerous Juvenile Criminal." The story practically writes itself. Naturally, the Journalism Club wanted to look into your story. I happened to notice something very odd while looking into your case. Nowhere, in any coverage of the incident, was the name of the victim ever mentioned. While this isn't entirely unusual, as the

names are often withheld, it is *very* strange that no one, not one source, has managed to uncover the identity of the victim."

Akira's eyes widened slightly. No one knew the man that sued him? *Then again, I remember him asking the police to keep his name out of the papers…* he thought, pursing his lips in thought. *But, for no one to actually get his name? That's a little weird.*

"...I don't know his name." Akira answered after some thinking. "He never said who he was. And I didn't ask."

Aikawa looked a little disappointed by his response. "That's a shame. In that case, is it okay if I ask another question? Did you really attack the victim, unprovoked?"

"Would it matter if I said I didn't?" Akira replied, surprising her as he gave a bitter smile. "No offense, Aikawa-senpai, but everyone's already decided that I'm scum of the earth. Who are they going to believe? Some kid, or the justice system?" He realized a moment later what he had just said and internally cursed. He sighed and turned away, not bothering to look back at her. "Sorry, senpai, but I'll be leaving. I have to get home early today."

He walked away and didn't look back. Inside the bag, Morgana shifted and slowly pushed his head out from the bag, careful not to be seen. "Hey, what was she saying about an incident?" he asked curiously. Among the thieves, he was the only one besides Ann who didn't know the truth behind his circumstances.

Akira sighed again. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately. "I'll tell you later..."

TakeYourTime

April had passed, and eventually May came. School had proceeded like usual, with students still going about their daily lives. That said, there was a palpable sense of excitement in the air as well as confusion. Kamoshida had not yet returned from his self-imposed suspension, and the students were beginning to question why.

Akira wondered how they would react when the truth of his crimes

came to light. At the same time, he wondered about how the aftermath would be handled. If the man straight-up confessed about his wrongdoings, how well would Kobayakawa be able to cover it up? If his confession was public, he doubted the principal could try and cover it up. There would always be that one weak link that would break when enough pressure was applied. Someone would spill the beans.

Another important question was what would be done about the victims. Akira knew that there were many who had been deeply scarred by Kamoshida's actions. Would the confession alone be enough to give them the peace they needed? Would it really be enough to heal the wounds?

He honestly didn't know the answer.

Pondering about the questions for later, Akira instead focused on his present state of affairs. It was now lunch time and was off to either look for Ryuji, Ann or Makoto or find a quiet place to eat where he wouldn't be bothered.

By luck, he happened to come across Ryuji, though he wasn't alone. He was talking with someone else. A student around their age with dark brown hair and tanned skin, perhaps in a sport club judging by his well-toned physique. He was wearing a jersey with the jacket zipped open and the pants pulled up to his knees. Judging by the look on Ryuji's face, their talk looked important. Not wanting to intervene, Akira pulled himself out of sight.

"So, how's everyone doing?" he heard Ryuji asked. "I heard that the Track Team might be coming back together."

"Well, there's still some tension." the other person answered. "Ever since Kamoshida caused all that shit, things aren't how they used to be, man. Takeichi's high-strung. He's been working his ass off to make sure everything works out, but you can tell it's getting to him."

"Did they decide who's going to be the new coach?"

"You remember that chubby guy that followed Kamoshida around as an aid before he became the Social Science teacher?"

Ryuji spluttered. "A-are you freaking kidding me?! Yamauchi?!" The other student nodded grimly. The delinquent blonde's face twisted angrily. "He doesn't know a damned thing about track, much less physical education!"

"Way I heard it, Kamoshida's been pulling some strings to make it work. Seems like he's just reviving it so he can have it under his thumb. Best guess, having an incompetent coach and a shitty club to make the Volleyball Club look better by comparison."

Ryuji kicked the floor. "Fuck!" After a minute of angry ranting, he calmed down. He let out a frustrated groan as he ran a hand through his blonde locks. "I'm sorry, Nakaoka. If I didn't lash out like that..."

"Hey, don't blame yourself." Nakaoka shook his head. "Way I see it, that asshole was looking for a scapegoat. You just happened to fit the bill." The former track member then cracked a smile. "Don't worry so much, Sakamoto. Even if Yamauchi thinks he can control the track, we're gonna prove him wrong."

"Nakaoka..."

The tanned teen patted Ryuji on the shoulder, then walked away. Once he was sure it was safe, Akira stepped out. Noticing him approaching, Ryuji's otherwise angry face softened. "I...take it you caught all that?"

"Sorry for spying."

"Nah, don't be." Ryuji waved it off.

Morgana poked his head out, face curious. "Who was that guy? It seemed like you two were close." he noted. "Was he another of Kamoshida's victims?"

"Yeah. His name's Nakaoka. The two of us were on track together. Besides me, he was one of the best runners we had. I was actually gonna give up my spot as starter for him when we were up for the Nationals up until King Asshole happened." Ryuji explained. "When I got angry at Kamoshida and got the team disbanded, most of the guys were pissed at me. Not that I blamed 'em. It was my fault. But

Nakaoka was one of the few guys who believed in me. He's been keeping me posted about the rest of the guys."

"And?"

Ryuji scowled. "Apparently, one of Kamoshida's little lackeys, a fatass named Yamauchi, is gonna be the new coach for the track team when they're brought back. Looks like Kamoshida decided they might be useful if only to make them crappy and have Volleyball look better in comparison. Yamauchi doesn't know anything about physical education. Guy probably never did a single workout in his life."

Akira cocked his head. "Is he as fat as Kobayakawa?"

"I'd say so." Ryuji chuckled. "Anyway, things are looking pretty dicey. But hey, with Kamoshida's change of heart, who knows? Maybe Yamauchi will be kicked to the curb, too!" It was an optimistic thought, but it was clear how much Ryuji still cared about track. Running had been his life. His dream. It had a chance to come back from the brink.

It made Akira wonder if he would ever rejoin, if given the opportunity. *But would that be possible?* he wondered. *Ryuji did say that most of the members weren't too happy with him, even after all this time.*

"Oh, there you guys are." Akira and Ryuji turned their heads, seeing Makoto and Ann approaching. "We were looking for you two."

"Hm? What's up?"

"There's going to be an assembly tomorrow." Makoto informed them. "Principal Kobayakawa is going to be giving a speech early in the morning."

Ann shook her head. "Way I heard it, it's supposed to be about what happened to Shiho."

"Tch. Figures." Ryuji clicked his tongue. "It'll probably be to bolster the school's rep. By the way, any news about Kamoshida?"

"None." Makoto said. "But I did hear Kawakami-sensei whisper

about something interesting. Apparently, the other day, Kamoshida turned in his letter of resignation." This drew shocked and ecstatic looks from everyone. "He's also rescinded your guys' suspensions too."

"Seriously?" Ryuji whispered, star-struck. "Then, he really did have a change of heart?!"

"Hmph! Was there any doubt?" Morgana huffed arrogantly before a troubled look appeared on his face. "But, is that really going to be enough for everyone to get some peace of mind?"

A troubled silence was the answer that came afterwards.

TakeYourTime

The second of May arrived with much apprehension.

As Makoto had stated the other day, there was an assembly early in the morning. Akira was a little groggy still, so he wasn't entirely awake. Everyone around him was chattering among themselves and questioning about what was happening. Some had correctly guessed that the assembly was most likely done in response to Shiho Suzui's attempted suicide. Speaking of, the poor girl had not yet stirred from her coma, making them worry. Her existence was another reminder that Kamoshida absolutely needed to pay for his crimes.

If his way of atoning was just to rescind some suspensions and turn in a letter of resignation, then perhaps a bit of an extra push was needed.

"Gah, this is freaking boring..." Ryuji complained beside him. "Wish they'd just hurry up and get it over with."

"Have to agree with you, there." Morgana said in agreement. "This place is making me feel so cramped."

After a few more minutes of chatter, the principal stumbled into view, his bulging form struggling to stay fit in his clothes. Akira wondered how embarrassing it would be if his buttons suddenly popped and exposed his fat to the world. When he pictured the scene, Akira felt

a little green in the face and promptly purged the image from his mind, hoping to whatever deity was in the world that those buttons stayed intact.

"A-hem!" Principal Kobayakawa cleared his microphone. "We will now begin this morning's assembly. "As many of you know already, last month, a tragic incident took place. One of our second-year students, Shiho Suzui, attempted to commit suicide. The reasons behind these actions are still currently under investigation-"

Ann scoffed upon hearing those words and glared holes into the man's body, as if hoping Carmen would somehow manifest and burn Kobayakawa into a lump of charcoal.

"-but we would like to say that, under no circumstances, should anyone ever consider the thought of taking their own life. I would also like to say that Suzui-chan has survived her ordeal, but it will take a long time before she recovers." Kobayakawa paused briefly before he continued. "Everyone in this room has a bright and important future ahead of them. Therefore, I would like each and every one of you to think carefully about your future and..."

His words were cut off when the sound of the gym doors were pulled open, squeaking loudly and announcing a new arrival. To the thieves' surprise, it was none other than Suguru Kamoshida. His face was pale, eyes bloodshot with dark bags underneath his eyes, and his body sagging like a heavy weight had just been strapped to his body.

Kobayakawa stared at Kamoshida's arrival in surprise. "Kamoshida-kun?"

The PE teacher looked at the gathered students for a moment before his eyes settled on Ann, who's eyes burned with intense hatred. He visibly recoiled, but then accepted her hatred for what it was worth before he dragged himself up on stage.

"Kobayakawa-san, if I may?"

His voice was hoarse. He sounded so tired and exhausted, looking ready to collapse any second. Kobayakawa wasn't entirely sure

what to make of the situation, but he nodded and stepped aside, letting Kamoshida take the stage. The man nodded in gratitude and stood before his students, hands wrapped around the edges of the podium.

"I...would like to say something to all of you." he began slowly. Akira noticed that he was forcing himself to look at the gathered group instead of looking away in shame. His eyes were also watery, looking ready to burst out crying in seconds. "A few days ago, I recently handed in my letter of resignation. As of today, I...would like to formally announce that I am leaving Shujin Academy." Shocked gasps erupted across the gym. Everyone was thrown off by this statement. The thieves, however, listened with rapt attention. "As for why I am leaving, I...will reveal the truth to all of you."

Kamoshida took a deep, shaky breath. Then he exhaled.

"Last year, as you all know, the track team was disbanded on account of one of its members, Ryuji Sakamoto, attacking me." Kamoshida started. Some students looked at Ryuji, who frowned upon being singled out. "In self-defense, I retaliated. In the struggle, I broke his leg and ended his career. In reality, what happened that day was… Well, as much as it shames me to say it, what I did on that day was no accident. In reality, I purposely shattered Sakamoto's knee and made sure that he would *never* pursue his dream of becoming a Track athlete ever again."

Startled gasps. Disbelief. Shock. So many emotions were running through the minds and faces of everyone around Akira. Ryuji in particular looked both dumbstruck by what he was hearing, and at the same time, livid to hear the truth spill out of his mouth, even if Kamoshida was saying all of this with great shame and despair.

"I had purposely spread information about Sakamoto's parental situation and pushed the Track Team to perform in unfeasible conditions. I saw it as an eyesore. I wanted it gone, so Shujin's Volleyball team would have the chance to steal the spotlight." the fallen king admitted. "I...also did so because I selfishly believed that Sakamoto, who had incredible talent, would outshine my own. I know that there are many people who have begun to forget that I was once an accomplished Volleyball player. Given a few years,

and...I would no longer be remembered, because Ryuji Sakamoto would be the talk of Tokyo. A new gold medalist at the Olympics."

From the far side of the room, Nakaoka's hands curled into fists, trembling with anger. "That's *it* ?" he whispered in outrage. "You ruined not only our careers, but crushed Sakamoto's dream, all because you didn't want to be *forgotten* ?!"

"Sakamoto, and the members of the Track Team, are not the only ones I've harmed. I have also harmed many other students at this school. I both verbally, and physically, abused students of this school, both inside and outside the Volleyball team. E-even worse, I..." Tears openly spilled down Kamoshida's face as he lowered his head, no longer able to look at the faces of the students. "I...sexually assaulted the female members of the Volleyball team."

His knees buckled. He fell down, with only his hands firmly gripping the podium and keeping him in clear view of the students.

" *I* am the reason why Shiho Suzui tried to kill herself!"

By this point, Kamoshida was openly sobbing. On the stage, members of the faculty were staring in a mixture of disgust and shock. Some were fully aware of Kamoshida's actions, while others had been kept in the dark. The same could be said about the students. The more recent first years did not know about Kamoshida's actions up until now and could only feel imagine the horrors that his victims must have felt. There was not one person who was now openly wishing that Kamoshida would drop dead at this moment.

"I-I thought of Shujin...to be like my castle..." Kamoshida powered through his sobs, doing nothing to stop the waterworks. "I...I was a-able to expel students, simply be-because I did not like them. I-I have rescinded the expulsions of t-two students from this school." In an attempt to stand, Kamoshida lost strength. The podium tipped to its side and clattered to the ground, the microphone squealing in protest. Kamoshida fell on all fours, head pressed up against the floor. "I-I am...truly sorry!"

"K-Kamoshida-kun! Please, get off the stage!" Kobayakawa cried in

panic. Whether it was out of fear of Kamoshida exposing him or because of the uproar he was causing was unknown. "Compose yourself, man!"

"I...I swear, on my life, t-that I will a-atone for my despiscable actions!" Kamoshida lifted his head up and pleaded. "S-someone! Please! Call the police!"

Twenty minutes later, the police arrived at Shujin Academy, finding Kamoshida on the ground as little more than a sobbing, pitiful mess. As the handcuffs were slapped over his wrists and he was hauled away, some heard him thank the police profusely in the midst of his constant apologies. In an attempt to re-establish order, classes were canceled for the day and the teachers called to disperse the shocked crowd.

In the middle of all of this chaos and confusion, one student watched Akira Kurusu, Makoto Niijima, Ryuji Sakamoto and Ann Takamaki leave together, looking surprised by the surprising turn of events but overall pleased by the results.

"No way..."

He didn't know why, but for some reason, Mishima found himself smiling.

"The Phantom Thieves of Hearts… They're for real!"

TO BE CONTINUED…?

A/N : So, it's around 1 AM as I'm about to post this chapter. I am in Oregon, in a motel with my sister visting her best friend to see her four-month-old baby. Fun fact, the little tyke likes to eat my fingers.

Around eight or nine, me and my sister will be leaving for home. Thank god. Bad news the drive is eight hours. My ass will be severely numb.

But enough about that. For this chapter, I wanted to give some attention to other characters. We've been formally introduced to

Haru, some foreshadowing to Futaba who is known to some of the people in the neighborhood, as well as some other stuff.

The chick who was interviewing Akira was actually the reporter chick that you can talk to in the second-floor hallway. I was sad that she wasn't made into a fully fleshed-out character, so I decided to give her a role. She will not be replacing Ohya, nor will she be a Confidant, however.

Regarding Nakaoka being significantly nicer to Ryuji, it was done mostly because, upon replaying the game countless times, you start to notice that Ryuji was purposely made the butt-monkey of the group, even in serious situations. I refuse to believe that he could be idiotic, especially since Dancing in Starlight tells us through Makoto's Social that Shujin takes its academics VERY seriously.

So, yeah. Unlike in the game, Ryuji has a few friends still from the Track Team. You can expect him to show up often as I do Ryuji's Confidant storyline.

Also, in regards to me including Kasumi from Persona 5 Royal, I'm afraid that will be have to be for a separate story altogether, especially since we're already so far into the story. That said, I am considering Takuto Maruki if only to give the victims of Kamoshida's victims some peace of mind and the help they desperately need.

One more thing. This is to the people who are saying my stories are either dead or I need to update. For fuck's sake, calm your tits. I'll get to them when I get to them. And NEVER tell me a story is dead when I have not come out and say "hey guys, this story is dead." Seriously, that just really pisses me off.

Alright, that's it for now. Friendly reminder that this story has a TV Tropes page, so check it out and feel free to edit and add to it. Special thanks to TV Tropes user hubakon1368 and WorstOtakuEver for updating it!

See You~

Confidant III: Death - Part I

This story is a work of fiction.

Any relation to persons, living or dead, as well as events, are purely coincidental.

The author owns none of the characters, or events, that take place here.

The world is not as it should be.

It's filled with distortion, and "ruin" will soon descend.

However...there are those who would challenge fate, in desire for change.

Now, one such group of Tricksters has emerged, in order to rise up against this ruin.

They are known simply as…

" ***The Phantom Thieves of Hearts."***

Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to

Confidant III: Death – Part I

Akira opened his eyes and was greeted with a familiar shade of blue. *Still very uncomfortable,* he thought with a grimace as he pushed himself off the bed, rolling his neck. Pulling himself up off the bed, he exited the cell and entered the central area, where Igor and Lavenza were waiting for him.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room." the long-nosed man greeted, his smile wider than usual. "It seems you've been through quite the

ordeal. A splendid showing, however. Truly, you have the makings of a great thief."

Somehow, the frizzy-haired teen knew the old man knew more than he was letting on. It was like he knew full well what he was getting himself into when he obtained his Persona, yet remained silent on the matter. It made him wonder what else he was hiding, but did not push the matter. Something told him that, even if he did push for answers, he would only receive cryptic replies in turn.

"You defeated the King of Lust, and toppled his castle." Lavenza continued, a faint smile appearing on her face. "And in doing so, you've prevented the shackles that bind you from dragging you into the "ruin." Not an easy feat, by any means." Her features then shifted, becoming stern. "That being said, don't get cocky. The "ruin" still advances."

Akira frowned deeply. What was the ruin that they kept mentioning? He recalled one of the previous conversations they had when he was here. They said it was "the unruly hearts of men." Did that mean that there would be more like Kamoshida?

They weren't expecting him to continue the Metaverse adventures, did they? He and the others were risking their lives, fighting Shadows in order to make Kamoshida confess, if only to save his own hide and bring that despicable man to justice for what he had done.

"There is much you will come to understand, in time." Igor told him, waving his hand around in a gesture. "By the way… I see you've begun to foster new bonds." He held his hand over the desk. Seemingly appearing from thin air was a deck of cards. With a flick of the hand, six cards were sprawled across the desk, each with a different design and numeral. "As we have told you before, the strength of your bonds will increase your own powers. That said, they are far from superficial."

"Your Confidants are genuine bonds." his assistant continued. "Like you, they are outcasts. By strengthening your relationships with them, you will gain not only their cooperation, but your own heart will be tempered as well. Treat your bonds carefully, Trickster."

Akira nodded. He hadn't exactly seen his bonds with his friends that way, but he was glad that the two cleared up the confusion. That said, he did wonder why there were six cards. If he were to count Morgana, there should only be four, so who were the other two?

"These Confidants will affect not only yourself, but even our own services." Igor chuckled. "The Personas born here will gain strength, equivalent to your bonds." The room became filled with noise, the sirens ringing loudly. "It seems our time is up for now."

The small girl bowed her head. "'till we meet again."

The young man wanted to ask more questions, but his eyes grew heavy. His legs buckled, and in the next moment, the world became swallowed in shadow.

When his eyes opened again, he was back in his room.

"...after Kamoshida confessed, the next couple of days were hectic." Akira continued after a slight pause, wincing as he rubbed his forehead. The haze over his mind was still present. He felt like he was having a migraine, trying to remember so many things at once. "Not that I have to tell you that..."

"Indeed not." Sae shook her head. "No one had ever expected to hear that a respected sportsman had sexually assaulted his own students, much less abused them. I was tasked with handling the prosecution. His confession, as well as the overwhelming evidence and testimonies from both the students and the teachers, more or less made the case the easiest we've ever had. As far as I know, Kamoshida is still in prison."

The small grin on her face faded, returning to its cold seriousness. "Still, you expect me to believe this nonsense about a world based on human thought? You *do* remember that your life is on the line here, Akira-kun."

"Believe what you will, Sae-san." Akira told her simply. He took a moment to breathe. "After we brought down Kamoshida… We

thought it was over. No more Metaverse, no more Phantom Thieving. We were going to go our separate ways. At least, that was the plan..."

"And what changed?" Sae questioned. Even she had to admit, she was curious. Even if she didn't accept what she was being told, she could not deny that Akira and his group had the ability to change a person's heart. Such power could easily corrupt a person, but here he was, admitting that he would just prefer living a normal life. *I wish he had continued to live a normal life…* Sae thought bitterly. "What made you continue being a Phantom Thief?"

A mirthless chuckle escaped Akira as he slumped in his seat, meeting her gaze. "A run-in with a shitty adult, at the celebration we were going to have after making Kamoshida pay..."

May 3rd.

When Akira and Makoto arrived, they saw police cards outside the front gates. Students were randomly pulled aside, some staying behind either at the officer's behest or simply curious to see what was going on. There was a palpable sense of excitement and wariness in the air. The former couldn't help but shift uncomfortably, inching away and tempted to bolt when he saw the officers. It was only Makoto putting a reassuring hand on his shoulder that made him calm down.

"Relax. I don't think they're here for you, Akira." she told him. "They're probably questioning the students about Kamoshida."

"I know..."

"Yo!" The two looked over their shoulder, finding Ryuji approaching with a smile on his face, clearly happy with yesterday's events. The smile faded, however, when he saw the police. "Aw, shit."

"Makoto just got done saying this, but they aren't here for him." Morgana poked his head out from Akira's bag. "Still, that doesn't mean you should relax. I sincerely doubt they know about the

Metaverse or the app, but it pays to be careful." He then looked around, as if searching for someone in particular. "By the way… Where is the ojou-sama?"

"What, you mean Ann?" The not-cat nodded. Ryuji shrugged. "She said she was gonna be running late. I think she's visiting Shiho at the hospital. Maybe give her the good news. By the way, you guys wanna meet up later? I actually wanted to talk to you guys about something."

Makoto grew curious. "What about?"

"I'll text you the details later, don't worry!" the blonde delinquent assured. "Anyway, let's head to class, yeah?"

TakeYourTime

While Akira and the other thieves were busy with school work, Sae was called into work. The SIU Director had given her the details about her newest case, one that was of the utmost importance, or so he said. The details were already sent to her laptop, and she was expected to go over them as soon as possible. Since she was still busy reviewing the details behind her own assignment, that being trying to find a connection between the Mental Breakdown incidents and the Psychotic Breakdown scandals, it had been a while before she could actually get to it.

To her slight chagrin, the SIU Director had also called on Akechi's assistance. She honestly didn't understand why, though. From the way her superior made it sound, the case was cut and dry. The person they were going to prosecute was willing to spill the beans the moment he was to be interrogated, and they were already receiving substantial amounts of evidence that would ensure this person would spend the rest of their life in a jail cell, so why involve the kid detective in all this?

"So, Sae-san, what exactly is it that we're working on this time?" Akechi inquired curiously, a leg crossed over the other while he sipped his coffee. Sae wasn't particularly fond of this coffee house, but she needed the extra caffeine. "The Director seemed like he was busy when he called me, so I didn't get very many details."

"I'm looking at it now." Sae replied curtly while trying not to let her irritation show. Her fingers flew across the keyboard before she pulled up the file her superior sent her. "The case practically settles itself based on the first few paragraphs alone. The perp committed repeated acts of abuse, both verbal and physical, as well as sexual assault and rape. The rape victim attempted suicide, and is currently in the ICU."

Akechi pursed his lips. "That reminds me, wasn't there a news report about a girl jumping off the roof of Shujin Academy?"

"Was there?" Sae looked up in surprise. This was the first she was hearing about it.

The detective looked surprised. "You didn't know? From what I've heard, she was a member of the school's Volleyball team and was even made the starter. Some think she tried to kill herself because of the pressure, but I have my doubts. I would have thought you kept up with that kind of news, especially since it involves the school your younger sister goes too."

There was a slight pang of guilt in Sae's heart when he said that. When was the last time she and Makoto had spoken, ever since she began her current case? Actually, why hadn't Makoto mentioned this to her? Had it affected her studies in some way? Was Akira Kurusu perhaps involved? That last thought made her bite her lip in agitation. The last thing she needed was unnecessary trouble brought to her doorstep by that troublesome kid. Call her harsh for thinking that, but if it weren't for the fact that their fathers were friends, and that she felt obligated to act in her father's place, she would never have accepted him into her home.

"I've been so busy with the case, I've barely paid much attention to the news reports." she replied. "At any rate, the culprit is… Suguru Kamoshida?!" Sae's eyes widened to the point where they might pop out from the sockets. She recognized the name easily, as had Akechi. "The gym teacher at Shujin Academy, a former Olympic gold medalist, and the coach for the volleyball team?"

"Oh, my… That's one hell of a coincidence." Akechi said, getting over his shock. "What else is there?"

Sae looked over the files and relayed them with barely concealed shock and disgust. This was… What even was this? How could the teachers, much less the Principal himself, even allow someone like this to commit such acts and not bother to tell anyone?! And why had no one said anything?! To say that she was confused would be an understatement. This was making no sense. The further she read, the more sickened she became.

Oh, god. What if Makoto had gotten involved in all this?

That thought terrified her more than it should have.

"Records of the abuse are apparently recorded all the way back for the last three years." Sae gritted her teeth. "One of the more major incidents was last year, where he apparently goaded a student into attacking him under the pretense of self-defense, then shattered the student's knee. And he's also responsible for that attempted suicide you mentioned earlier"

"My word..." Akechi frowned. "For people to have remained quiet about all of this for so long. Why did someone speak up about this now?"

"They didn't. Kamoshida confessed all of his wrongdoings yesterday to the entire school during a morning assembly."

He blinked in pleasant surprise. "He confessed his crimes?"

Sae nodded. "Yes. The reports say he was practically a sobbing mess when the police arrived. He's currently waiting to be interrogated. Though there is something odd mentioned here."

"Oh, and what's that?"

Sae turned the laptop around and showed him the image attached to the file. "A few days before his confession, a *calling card* was posted all over the bulletin board. A group calling themselves the Phantom Thieves of Hearts called out Kamoshida and claimed that they would *take his heart* and make him confess his crimes." She gave a small scoff, finding the idea ludicrous. "It was most likely a prank, though the timing seemed a bit-"

"Sae-san, do we have any of these calling cards in evidence?"

She was stopped mid-sentence by Akechi's sudden question. Looking at the teenager, she found an unusual sight. His smile was gone, and his eyes were narrowed. They were intently focused on the image, as if studying every word pasted on it.

What was this? She had never seen this look before.

"I...believe so."

Suddenly, he stood up. "In that case, please handle things on your end. I'll conduct the interrogation." he told her, his voice devoid of the cheerful and infuriating polite arrogance she had grown accustomed to. Once more, Sae found herself startled by this sudden change in tone. Without another word, he grabbed his briefcase and walked away, taking out his phone and dialing a number. "It's me. I'm on my way to the precinct. I'd like it if you could..."

His voice trailed off as he walked away. Sae watched him leave, utterly baffled by what just transpired.

"What was that…?"

TakeYourTime

"Finally, break time!" Morgana mewled from inside Akira's desk, stealthily slipping into his bag. "I thought it'd never end… What's up with that Chouno woman? I mean, really! Who needs *that* much make-up?"

Akira shrugged, not knowing the answer to that. Still, she seemed to be slightly nicer than Ushimaru, who took every opportunity he could to catch him dozing off. Sometimes he would be able to effortlessly evade the incoming chalk, other times he was so preoccupied with his thoughts he never saw it coming. Regardless, with class over for now, Akira was free to spend some time to himself.

He left his classroom, bag in tow and made his way to the courtyard. Along the way, he heard the excited whispers and chatters of the other students.

"The police are still here?"

"What did you expect? A teacher confessing like that is a big deal!"

"I dunno. I still think somebody must have blackmailed him. Not that I blame 'em, though. Did you hear the crap that came outta his mouth?"

"I heard he was even trying to make passes on Takamaki-senpai!"

"Seriously? Shit, now I feel bad."

"Don't forget about what he said about Sakamoto. I had him pegged as the bad guy, but after hearing what Kamoshida said..."

Looks like they're starting to come around. Akira noted with a slight smile. He wondered if Kamoshida's confession would give Shiho some peace of mind when she woke up. And maybe the Track Team would make peace with Ryuji, with the truth out. *Though I wish my situation was better. I guess people don't care much that the kid with an assault record is still here. Eh, oh well.*

"Oh, Akira-kun!" Morgana let out a mewl of excitement, seeing Ann approach him. "Got a sec?" He nodded. The blonde girl led him to the courtyard, where they had taken their seats at the small table off to the corner, where they had first met. "I got a call from the hospital. Shiho's finally awake!"

"Really? That's great!" Morgana cheered. Akira smiled, equally as happy for her. "Have you told her the good news?"

"Not yet." Ann shook her head. "She goes in-and-out, but the doctor said she should be fully conscious by tomorrow. I'm thinking of giving her the good news, then." She let out a deep, heavy sigh as she slumped in her seat. "I feel so relieved… When we were in the Palace, I kept thinking, what if Shiho doesn't wake up? What if all of this is for nothing? What scared me even worse was not getting to hear her voice again."

"Ann-dono..." Morgana whispered, eyes softening. "You truly do care about Shiho deeply, don't you?"

Ann nodded. "She was my first real friend here. When I first got to Shujin, everyone just thought I was the stereotypical American girl who caused trouble and liked to party. At first, no one would talk to me, except for people who thought I was really good with English."

"How'd you meet Suzui-san?" Akira asked.

The girl giggled. "It was during Art Class. She just randomly came up from behind me and told me my painting sucked. At first, I felt freaking pissed someone could say that about my drawing, but then I realized she just came and flat out said what was on her mind. She didn't see me as that odd girl who didn't fit in. She just saw...me. Before I knew it, the two of us were as thick as thieves." Ann looked up at the ceiling, eyes glimmering as she recalled fond memories. "I have so much I want to tell her. I want to tell her how sorry I am, for just thinking that things were fine… For just leaving her out to dry. Even if she doesn't forgive me, I just want to tell her everything. Even if I have to get on my hands and knees."

"I'm sure she'll forgive you."

Ann blinked at Akira's words. She stared at him for a second before she bit her lower lip. "Y-you think so?"

"Of course she will." Morgana agreed. "From what you've told us, she doesn't sound like the kind of person who would toss your friendship away, just like that."

"I hope so..."

"Yo."

The two looked over their shoulders, finding Ryuji approaching. "Ryuji-kun?" Ann said in surprise. "What're you doing here?"

"Eh, happened to see you guys while I was talking with Nakaoka and the Prez." Ryuji shrugged. Akira tilted his head. Nakaoka and Makoto, together? That sounded like an odd combination. Seeing his confusion, he began to explain. "Makoto was asking him about Yamauchi. Since Kamoshida was planning on making the Track Team crash and burn so the Volleyball Team would get more

attention and all. And now that Kamoshida's spilled the beans and got a long life behind bars, she wanted to know if she could do anything to make sure Yamauchi didn't try and fuck things up for them."

"So the Track Team is coming back?" Ann beamed. "That's great! I bet you must be happy. Ooh, but wait, would you still be able to…?"

Ryuji let out a mirthless chuckle, tapping his foot against the floor. "It's been getting better since I got Captain, but my leg's still busted. I don't think I'll be able to run like I used to anytime soon." He then looked to the side, eyes downcast. "sides, I'd probably just get in the way. Nakaoka and the guys can handle it." Akira and Ann shared a look. It was clear that Ryuji still felt guilty. He felt responsible for track being shut down, even though it was Kamoshida's fault. "But, enough about that. What's got you so excited?"

"Shiho's finally coming around." Ann told him the good news, making him grin. "I'm thinking of visiting her tomorrow and tell her the good news."

"That's awesome! You want us to come along when you go?"

"That would be great."

The bell began to ring, signaling the end of break. "And there's the bell." Morgana groaned. "Back into that cramped desk I go. Try not to doze off this time, Akira."

"Sure thing, *mom* ." Akira rolled his eyes. Ann and Ryuji laughed at his expense before the three of them went their separate ways.

TakeYourTime

After school had wrapped up, the Phantom Thieves of Hearts convened as per Ryuji's request. The four of them had gathered at Big Bang Burger and had ordered some food. Unlike before, Akira had gone with a lighter meal. The others were still amazed by his ridiculously large gut, seeing as how he was able to devour a three-foot tall burger by himself.

"Okay, so what did you want to talk about, Ryuji?" Makoto asked.

"Does this have to do with Yamauchi?"

He shook his head and waved his hands. "No no, nothing like that. I'm actually thinking about how we could use that gold medal we got from the Palace." The others stared at him curiously. "Well, I looked it up online, and gold medals usually go for 30,000 yen or so. I was thinking, maybe, we can sell it and have a celebration."

"A celebration?" Ann asked. "You mean, like, for taking down Kamoshida?"

"Yeah! I mean, come on. We finally got rid of the biggest asshole on the planet. Not to mention let everyone know we were the ones who put him behind bars. I think we deserve to dine like heroes, or some stupid crap like that."

Makoto hummed thoughtfully, rubbing her chin. "You know… That doesn't sound like a bad idea." she said with a thin smile. "If I recall, Hotel Milton is holding a discounted all-you-can-eat buffet sometime in Golden Week. Perhaps we can have our celebration then?"

"Golden Week, huh?" Akira mused. "That could work."

"Makes sense." Ryuji nodded. "Though I guess we should hold off on selling the medal until Golden Week rolls around then, huh?"

Morgana nodded. "That would be a smart move, especially since the police are still investigating Kamoshida. Speaking of which..." He glanced at the small television set sitting in the upper corner of the room, providing entertainment for the customers. "Looks like he's on the news, along with Shujin. I hope with this, the victims can get some peace of mind."

"I hope so, too." Ann nodded strongly in agreement with the not-cat creature. "He's hurt way too many people. I actually still hear some people trying to defend Kamoshida, but I think it's mostly just people who were in his corner than anything else."

While it was true that the Phantom Thieves' actions had exposed Suguru Kamoshida for the corrupt adult he was, that did not mean that there was immediate positive results. The majority of the

students were shocked and disgusted by his reveal and were happy to see him get carted off in handcuffs. Others believed that someone had blackmailed Kamoshida and he was forced to lie, lest some horrible secret come out and ruin him worse than what the confession had done. As Akira and Makoto had learned based on the whispers they heard in the halls, these people were also those who benefited from Kamoshida's actions.

It was disheartening to learn that, despite what the frizzy-haired teen had thought, Kamoshida's words were not nonsense or trying to justify his actions. There were people like him in Shujin, people who's hearts were also twisted.

"For real…?" Ryuji frowned. He shook his head, unable to comprehend why anyone would want to defend that man's actions considering all that he had done before he sighed and scratched the back of his head. "Well, whatever. Let's ignore that shit. Golden Week is coming up pretty soon, so...here's hoping things go well?"

TakeYourTime

Rather than return to the Niijima household, Akira had decided to work at Leblanc. It was a slow day, with only a few customers coming every now and then. Sojiro was still as strict as ever, but no less encouraging as when he first met. While he had yet to learn how to make a decent plate of curry, he was making progress in his coffee making skills.

It was also on that day that Akira had made an acquaintence with a very odd, and very dangerous woman. The same woman he met when he first arrived at Cafe Leblanc looking for work.

It must have been getting close to evening, and was ready to call it in for the day as he prepared the next cup of coffee, a decaff for an office worker who ordered it and a plate of curry while complaining to his companion. He had just finished putting the coffee on the saucer and delivering it to the customer and was about to return behind the counter when he saw the blue-haired woman looking at him intensely, eyes roaming his slender physique.

Talk about creepy . Akira thought, a little disturbed. He wondered

briefly if she was like Kamoshida and was into younger people, but banished the thought and went back to work.

"Doc, as much as I'm sure Kurusu enjoys a beautiful woman such as yourself looking at him, mind toning it down a notch?" Sojiro came to his rescue, sounding a little exasperated.

The woman chuckled wryly. "Sorry, Boss. I was just thinking about getting some part-time help myself. I would try and put up an ad for it, but I'm afraid with my reputation, I don't think that will be happening anytime soon."

"Oh? Why's that? Last I checked, you ran a legitimate business."

"I do, but my last employer and I had something of an argument." The woman replied coolly before she turned to Akira. "Say, boyo. How do you feel about running clinical trials? I'd be happy to pay you for your services, of course."

Akira raised a brow and considered her offer. He was doing pretty good on cash, making sure to keep his spending to within a certain minimum, but he supposed more money couldn't hurt. He was a little suspicious about the whole thing, though.

"Why are you asking me?"

The woman shrugged. "A few reasons. I get better results with a teenager around your height and build. Whether or not you're up for it is up to you."

"Any side effects?"

"Whoa, hey now." Sojiro patted his shoulder. "Save that for when you aren't on the clock."

TakeYourTime

Sometime later, after Akira was allowed to pack up for the day and received his paycheck, he decided to take the goth woman's offer up. A little more pocket change could never hurt. His only concern was the nature behind the trials.

I really hope I'm not going to get some kind of weird disease from this…

Finding the woman's clinic wasn't hard. It seemed as though she was well-known, if perhaps with wariness. The officer that patrolled Yongen-Jaya seemed pretty suspicious and worried about why he was asking where he could find her clinic, more so when he told the doctor that he agreed to do a clinical trial.

He stepped inside the office, greeted with the smell of pine oaks. The walls were plain, decorated with only a few posters with slogans and metaphors relating to health. A small potted plant sat atop the check-in desk, the goth woman sitting behind it. She didn't notice him yet, more absorbed in her laptop. He couldn't see what it was that she was working on, but her fingers were typing away at it furiously.

Akira walked up to the front desk, lightly knocking on the wood. The woman looked up. "Oh, you're here. Decided to take me up on the offer?" Akira nodded. "Alright, give me a moment to finish up. Wait in the exam room for a few minutes, will you?"

The frizzy-haired teen did as he was told and stepped into the exam room. The door shut behind him with a 'click.' The room itself wasn't very big, having two or three beds covered in white sheets and pillows for patients to rest on. Thin green curtains sat in between beds to shield the patients for when they wanted privacy. On the left side was a bright screen with several x-rays, some showing ribs and arms and legs, but the rest strangely belonged to what looked like fish.

It was probably a good thing Morgana was wandering around Yongen while he was taking part in the medical trial. For someone who claimed they weren't a cat, he really seemed to love fish.

Akira did not have to wait for very long for the woman to arrive. "Sorry for the wait," she apologized. He dismissed the apology and told her it was alright. She nodded and thanked him for the patience and took a seat across from him. As she sat down, Akira took notice of her name tag.

Tae Takemi…

Well, at least he knew her name now.

"Before we start, there's some things I'd like to know." Takemi began. "Height, weight, blood type, etc. Those sorts of things before we start. As well as any allergies or bouts of sickness from when you were younger that you can remember."

From there, Takemi questioned him about various things. How tall he was, how much he weighed and what his blood type was were the easier questions. He didn't have any specific allergies and could only remember two or three times he became sick. All minor cases of the flu that were easily solved with medicine and a few good nights of sleep. There were other questions, such as what kinds of medicine he took and if he had any adverse reactions to them, though he assumed this was to gauge his reaction to when they began the trials.

Once he was done filling out the sheet, he handed the clipboard back to Takemi. She looked it over for a few minutes before nodding to herself, setting the clipboard aside. "Everything looks in order." She stood up and walked to the far back of the room, opening the cabinet containing various liquids and jars and taking one of the bottles out before handing it to Akira. "This is what you will be taking."

The second Akira took a quick sniff, he regretted it. He pulled the bottle away, feeling as though his nostrils had been set on fire. He also took notice of how the liquid inside the bottle seemed to churn with little movement on his part, as though it were alive.

"…this is safe, right?"

Takemi smirked. "You're just now asking that?" At his flat stare, she laughed. "Relax, we're well into the stage where it's safe to test on humans. Admittedly, though, this is skirting a bit on what's legally allowed. You should be fine, though."

Should be?!

Akira debated whether or not this was worth the risk before he decided to just say, 'fuck it.' He already went this far. And besides, how could this possibly be any worse than fighting Shadows? Bracing his tongue for the inevitable horrible taste awaiting him, he pinched his nose, brought the bottle to his lips and pulled his head back, gulping the bottle down in seconds.

"H-hey…!"

The moment the liquid entered his mouth, he almost spat it out. Every single piece of skin, even the ones buried underneath his teeth, was burning in pain. His tongue felt like it had just licked sandpaper a dozen times over in the span of a minute. The burn spread down into his throat and fell into his stomach, proceeding to make his organ do flips. His eyes turned watery and started spilling down his face.

He took it back. Fighting Shadows would have been preferable to this hell.

After a minute of enduring this hellish pain, Akira's mind went dark. When his brain rebooted, he found himself lying down in the bed. Takemi was scribbling something on her clipboard before noticing him. "Oh, you're awake." Akira stared at her in confusion. "Not long after you downed the whole thing, you fell unconscious. Speaking of, drinking the whole bottle in one sitting… Are you some kind of idiot?"

He opened his mouth to retort, but stopped when he felt how dull his insides were. Just what little air he sucked in was enough to irritate his mouth and tongue. He wanted to vomit. Noticing his discomfort, Takemi handed him another bottle; this one had clear fluids inside and was labeled "water." Without thinking, he tore off the cop and immediately downed half the bottle in a few seconds before gasping for air.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like crap." Akira said bluntly, causing her to chuckle. "How'd I do…?"

"Flying colors, mostly. What did you feel after you drank it?"

"Like I just swallowed a hundred lemons soaked in hot sauce. My mouth and throat felt like they were on fire and my stomach was doing backflips."

"I see… Interesting reaction." Takemi noted as she jotted his experiences down. "This should be some good data. You've been of great help, kiddo." Akira grumbled under his breath and pushed himself off the bed. "I'll give Boss your payment for helping me out."

"If you don't mind me asking, what is this for?"

"Hm? Oh, it's a testing drug." Takemi replied. "Like I said, it's already at the point where it can be safely tested on humans, but this is what's called the early test phases, so to speak. You've really been of great help." A curious glint entered her eyes as she looked at Akira up and down as if sizing him up. "Would you be interested in continuing these medical trials?"

Akira paled at the thought. After having tasted what must have been liquid hell, he would sooner go to Juvenile Hall than undergo this again.

"You don't have to give me an immediate answer," Takemi continued. "Just think it over. I'd be willing to sweeten the deal instead of just simply paying you."

"…I'll think about it."

Like hell I will.

TakeYourTime

Kamoshida sighed as he sat in a painfully uncomfortable chair after led onto the interrogation room. Ever since he confessed his crimes and turned himself over to the police, the police occasionally took him here and discussed the details behind his crimes. They wanted as much detail as possible, including the names of the students who he personally ruined.

Each time they finished their sessions, he felt so exhausted. All he

wanted to do was rest and let things run their course. He was taking his first step towards making amends for his crimes against the students, now all that was left was for things to run their course. With all the information and evidence stacking up against him, it was only a matter of time before he would eventually be sentenced to life imprisonment, if that.

No matter what the court decided, he'd accept whatever punishment they chose for him.

Yet, he couldn't understand why the police brought him back here. The people in charge of his case told him that they already finished their investigation, so there shouldn't be any more need for him. By now, there was only the matter of when he would stand before the court.

As he waited and pondered, the door opened. To Kamoshida's surprise, it wasn't a police officer or even a detective. Instead, it was a young student with brown hair and red eyes carrying a briefcase.

"Suguru Kamoshida, I presume?" the young man asked. Kamoshida nodded. "My name is Goro Akechi. I want to ask you a few questions?"

"Why?" Kamoshida asked. "I already told the police everything."

"You did." The young man pulled the chair opposite to the criminal away and sat on it before setting his briefcase down on the table. It was popped open with a few 'clicks.' Inside was a computer, several sheets of paper, documents, folders and a fountain pen. "You told the police, time and time again, about your actions at Shujin Academy. Of the students you abused, tormented and ruined." The sex offender winced at the brutal yet deserving remarks thrown his way. "And I want you to repeat what you told the police to me, again and again and again. As many times as needed."

He pulled out a plastic bag and set in on the table. Inside was a bright red card with a crudely drawn logo of a top hat bearing eyes and sharp teeth set into a grin.

"Tell me, what do you know about these so-called *Phantom Thieves*

of Hearts? "

TO BE CONTINUED…?

Confidants

Tae Takemi – DEATH:

A shady back-alley doctor in Yongen-Jaya who offered Akira a part-time job in testing an experimental drug. Appears to have a bad reputation and is known by some as "the Plague." She often frequents Café Leblanc.

A/N : There were several reasons why this chapter took so long. I was burned out, couldn't muster the motivation to write, depression, sickness, the fucking corona virus, but mostly because I had to re-evaluate the direction I was taking this.

When events began playing out like how they did in canon, despite the obvious change such as Makoto joining the Phantom Thieves early on, people started bitching about how the story wasn't changing enough. I promised there would be changes.

This was in spite of the fact that this story is written as being a "novelization" of Persona 5.

I may take creative liberties here and there, make small changes to a character and whatnot, but for the most part, I do not want to change the overall plan and direction of the story. Realizing this was a major reason why the chapter took so damned long.

Regarding my inclusion of Takuto Maruki, I have ultimately decided not to include any events that transpire in this story. That will instead be saved for a later installment…which probably won't see the light of day until Persona 5 Scramble is released here in the states.

Quick note that I will be going on hiatus for the foreseeable future, on account of me focusing on personal life and video games.

Namely, Doom Eternal, Persona 5 Royal, and Final Fantasy 7 Remake. I should also mention that another, more titanic story is currently in the works. Well, make that two or three. However, two of those three will not be published anytime soon.

I don't want a repeat of bloating my story count and leave a lot of them to collect dust.

That's it for now. Friendly reminder that Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to has a TV Tropes page, so please check it out and maybe add to it if you can?

See You .

ANNOUNCEMENT

Hey, everyone. It's been a while.

I'm guessing everybody's wondering why I've gone dark. Well, to answer that question, it's because, well, video games and lethargy and all that. I have so much free time that I don't know what to do with it, and half the time I don't feel like writing. Or I just don't know what to write.

Oh, and video games. Other than Persona 5 Royal, I got Nioh 2. Between those and Doom Eternal, my Playstation 4 hates me. We have a love and hate relationship.

Anyway, as for why I'm posting this, I decided to read over what i wrote so far for this story and...

Yikes. Just yikes.

Ultimately, I have decided to rewrite this story for two reasons. The first is the general grammar. Just, my god, what the fuck was I doing? I've seen so many errors and long-ass paragraphs that I wanna shoot myself. Granted, I still have a bad tendency to do that, but this is worse. The second is mainly the pacing. Over twenty chapters covering the Kamoshida Arc when it could have easily been done in ten, if properly paced.

So, yeah. Persona 5: Hoshi to Bokura to will be rewritten under the name "Persona 5: With the Stars and Us."

To the people who followed and favorited this story, I really am sorry. I would like to continue and just overhaul all the chapters completely, but I realize that some people do enjoy the original works. Hence why With the Stars and Us will be published as a separate story altogether.

Another announcement is that I've decided to write a Persona 5 Royal fanfic, specifically one where Kasumi joins the Phantom Thieves much earlier in canon. As in, Kamoshida Arc early. Oh,

the butterflies this will cause. Granted, I still need to complete the game first. I'm doing the vanilla storyline first, then do the new stuff on a NG+ walkthrough with Satanael and max stats. Now that I think about it, grinding for cash and filling the compendium all over again is going to be a fucking nightmare now. UGH!

Anyway, that's all the news I wanted to share with you guys. I hope you guys are doing well during these times, stay safe, practice social distancing and all that jazz, and just continue being awesome. And again, huge apologies to the people who stuck with this story to this point.

Sincerely, Starlight's Poet